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BY

HERBERT GREENOUGH SMITH

AUTHOR OF

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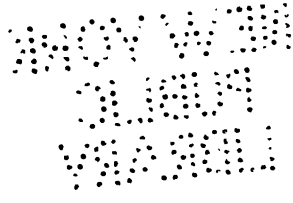

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W. W. Harp. Nov. 21, 1930

CASTLE SOMBRAS

CHAPTER I

THE CAMP BELOW THE CASTLE

ON a certain autumn evening in the year 1524, a troop of soldiers had halted before a wayside inn among the wilds of Yorkshire. The captain and the sergeant of the troop had taken up their quarters in the tavern, while the men had pitched their tents upon a space of grass-ground opposite, on the other side of the road. Between the tents and the road a huge fire had been kindled, round which most of the soldiers were lying or sitting. Some were engaged in eating, drinking, or cooking, while others were scouring steel caps and

cuirasses, on which the red glow of the firelight shone like blood. Others, again, came and went among the tents, while from the whole camp arose a noise of talking, laughter, and snatches of rough songs, like the buzz of a colossal hive.

A few yards beyond the tavern the road turned abruptly to the left, winding round the base of a steep and lofty crag which towered into the air above it. On the summit of this crag, far up, stood out the towers and battlements of Castle Sombras, black against the sky.

The sergeant of the troop was sitting alone on a bench beside the tavern door, before a rustic table, on which stood an empty flagon. He was a man of five and forty, broad and sturdy, whose rugged features, bronzed by years of active service, were half-hidden by a short, stiff beard beginning to turn grey, and lighted by a pair of keen, black eyes. He wore the steel skull-cap and light armour of a foot soldier, and was armed with a long

wheel-lock pistol and a plain sword—made for service rather than for show.

For some time the sergeant had been gazing in abstraction at the flagon on the table, too much absorbed in his reflections to perceive that it was empty; but at length, on raising it mechanically to his lips, and thereby discovering its condition, he started from his reverie, and, turning on his bench, shouted for the landlord of the tavern, who instantly made his appearance in the doorway.

The landlord's face was round and fat, and looked as if it ought to have been rosy; but the fact was that he was not a man remarkable for valour, and the presence of the troops disturbed him greatly; so that his countenance, which generally resembled a hot coal, now looked as if it had burnt out in ashes.

The sergeant pointed to the empty flagon.

"Good liquor!" he said, briefly. "Bring me another of the same."

"At your service, captain," replied the landlord, with servility. And taking up the flagon, he disappeared into the house.

"Captain, eh?" said the sergeant, with a chuckle. "I, a plain sergeant, look so like a captain that only a soldier's eye can tell the difference. But," he continued, raising his eyes and looking towards the angle of the road, where a sentinel was pacing to and fro, "it is time the captain himself was back from reconnoitring. I fear he might have spared himself the pains. Dare-devil though he is, he will hardly find the means of taking Castle Sombras." And, lifting his eyes to the black ramparts perched upon the summit of the crag, the sergeant shook his head.

The aspect of the castle might well justify his doubts. The crag on three sides was in many parts sheer precipice; on the fourth side the ascent was easier, but the narrow, zig-zag pathway that led upwards among rocks and boulders crossed at one point a yawning chasm by a drawbridge, which had

only to be raised to render all approach impossible. The castle itself, crouching grim and scowling on the summit, looked as much a portion of the crag as if a giant's hand had hewn it from the living rock. Near the foot of the declivity the sergeant could perceive, among the trees, the white spires of an abbey, on which the castle seemed to frown down darkly, like a demon watching the slumber of a saint.

He was roused from his meditations by the sound of a bugle at no great distance off.

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "Here comes the captain." And a few moments later the sentinel at the angle of the road lowered his halberd and saluted, as the captain, with some half a dozen followers, appeared upon the scene.

The captain—Captain Hilary Dare—who now approached his comrade, was a man at whom no stranger, and especially no woman, could avoid a second glance. Not that he was handsome—his features were redeemed

from plainness only by their sense of power, by the tranquil courage of the large grey eyes, and by the lustre which shone through them of a spirit to which peril and adventure were as the breath of life. He was somewhat taller than the sergeant; it would have been difficult to say which was the stronger or more wiry. His arms resembled his companion's, but, in addition to his sword and pistol, he wore a dagger, and in place of the steel skull-piece a flat cap of blue velvet, in the crown of which was a steel plate.

As he approached the bench on which the sergeant sat, the latter rose eagerly to meet him.

"Well, captain," he inquired, "what tidings? Is it as we feared?"

"It is, Philip," said the other. "All our information is correct. The bridge across the gulf is closely guarded. One man could hold the place against a thousand."

The two men sat down upon the bench, and for some minutes there was silence. The sergeant was the first to break it.

"Then it is impossible to storm the castle?"

"Impossible!" replied the captain, with strong emphasis.

"If we could only wait and starve them out!"

"Ha!" said Hilary. "If we could! But you know our orders—to take the castle if we can without delay, by force or stratagem, but not to waste above two days in the attempt, before continuing our march to Scotland. We must march to-morrow."

"True!" said the sergeant, regretfully. "Well, it's a pity—a sad pity. To have taken Castle Sombras would have been a feat which would have turned me to a captain in good earnest, and the captain to a major. And Sir John Sombras would have been a noble prize!"

"Noble, truly," said the captain, abstractedly. He had unbuckled his sword and thrown off his velvet cap, and was half reclining on the bench, with his elbow on

the table and his head supported on his hand. His eyes were fixed upon the camp across the road, but his thoughts were evidently far away.

"An outlaw," continued the sergeant, shaking his clenched fist at the castle on the crag. "A rebel to the King's authority! The King would give a jewel from his crown to the man who brought him in a prisoner."

"True," said his companion.

"Our King—King Henry the Eighth, Heaven save him!—is not the man to let a bold deed pass without reward. There are two things His Majesty admires with all his heart and soul—a brave man and a fair lady."

"True," said Hilary Dare, with the same abstraction as before.

"And for my part," said Philip, "I share his tastes. What say you, captain?"

The silence that followed this question roused the captain from his meditations, as silence sometimes does when speaking fails. Withdrawing his gaze from the distance, and

turning his eyes on his companion, he inquired :—

"What did you say?"

"Heaven save us!" cried the sergeant. "He has not heard a word of what I have been saying. I said I share the King's tastes, captain. I love a brave man and a fair lady. What say you?"

"Ah!" said Hilary, with a prodigious sigh.

The sergeant stared at him, astonished.

"Why, comrade," he said, clapping him upon the shoulder; "what is the matter with you? For the last two days you have been as moody as an owl."

"I know it," said the captain.

"Indeed, for months you have been an altered man. Why, when I think of our campaign last year—how gay you were, how ready at a bumper or a wild song! And now, though nothing ails you that I know of, you are always dreaming. You are never happy, except, indeed, when you are fighting.

You never smile, except when there is danger to be faced, when your life is in your hand, and when every moment threatens you with death."

"Because it is only at such moments that I am diverted from my thoughts."

"Your thoughts!" repeated the sergeant. "Are they so melancholy? Why?"

Hilary paused before replying.

"Listen," he said at last, with the air of one who takes a resolution. "How long have we known each other, Philip?"

"How long?" replied the other, after a brief consideration. "It is ten—it is eleven years, since we first fought side by side. Since then, we have lived and fought together. We have scarcely been a day apart. Though you are a captain and I am only a sergeant, we have been more than comrades——"

"True," said Hilary, extending his hand and clasping the sergeant's in a hearty grasp. "True, Philip, we have been friends. We

have had no secrets from each other. Have we?"

"None," replied Philip, returning the pressure cordially, "not one."

"Yes," said the other, slowly; "one!"

The sergeant stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I have never spoken of it, even to my oldest friend—not even to you, Philip. But I will do so now. And if you choose to laugh when you have heard my story, why, I will forgive you."

He paused for a few moments, during which the sergeant strove to guess what was to follow. Then he asked, abruptly:—

"How far is it from here to York?"

"How far from here to York?" returned the other, wondering what the question had to do with the expected revelation. "A two-hours' ride, perhaps. Not more."

"A two-hours' ride!" repeated Hilary. "It is just a year since I have been so near the spot which now awakes my memory so

keenly. You remember—but why should I tire you with the maunderings of a man who has chanced, like many a better man before him, to fall in love at first sight with a beautiful face?"

"But I assure you," said the sergeant, "that nothing could interest me more." He was leaning forward, listening, with eager eyes, like a man whose curiosity is a good deal piqued. The captain, glancing at his face, saw that he was in earnest. He continued:—

"You remember when we were at York, last year?"

"Yes, certainly."

"You know the old Church of St. Dominic?"

"No," said the sergeant. "No; not I. Stay! Was it not opposite the Spade and Spurs?"

"Yes, it was. I thought you would remember it."

"Certainly," said the sergeant, with a

smile of satisfaction; "I remember it perfectly. Oh, yes; I know St. Dominic's. They sell the best mild ale in England at the Spade and Spurs."

"Well," said Hilary, continuing, "it was there one day——"

"At the Spade and Spurs?" interrupted his companion.

"No; at St. Dominic's. It was there that I saw one day a young and lovely lady."

"Ah!" said the sergeant, with a world of meaning in his voice.

"Our eyes met. We both forgot the sacred office. Love sprang full-blown between us in a single instant. When she left the church, I walked behind her. I would have spoken, but for the presence of the old servant who attended her. Next day, I went to church again. She was there also, and again our eyes met. This time, when we left the church, chance favoured us. The old servant, seized with sudden giddiness, was obliged to rest on a stone bench. I hastened up, with

offers of assistance. None was needed; but I seized the chance to whisper a few words of passion in the lady's ear."

"And she listened?" asked the sergeant. "She was not offended?"

"I spoke with deep respect—with reverence. She could not be offended."

"Well?"

"She consented to let me plead my cause. Next day, at the appointed hour, she stole away to meet me. Our interview was hurried, for she was closely guarded, and delay was dangerous. But vows—lovers' vows of constancy, of deathless adoration — passed between us. Before we parted we arranged to meet again. But when the time arrived, I waited at the meeting-place in vain."

"She did not come?"

"She did not come!"

The sergeant shrugged his shoulders and emitted a low whistle.

"Fickle!" he said. "Fickle, like all the rest of them."

"Fickle!" repeated the other, with such a blaze of anger in his eyes that the sergeant stopped the philosophic wagging of the head with which he had accompanied his aphorism, and stared at him, astonished.

"Oh—ho!" he said, "No—no! Not fickle. A little changeable——"

"She had been taken away," continued Hilary, as if speaking to himself. "I know neither by whom nor to what place. As to her history, I know nothing, except that her name was Thyrza, and that she was an orphan and the ward of some great noble."

"But the most important thing," said the sergeant, after a brief silence, "you have not told me. What was she like?"

His companion drew a deep breath. "Ah, there," he said, "you ask me more than I can answer, Philip. I am a soldier—not a poet."

"Beautiful, you say?"

"Most beautiful!"

"Tall?"

"Tall."

"Dark or fair?"

"Her skin was fair, but her hair was black, and her eyes dark and full of flame."

"Quiet or lively?"

"Both. She was by nature quiet—even shrinking. But there was a sleeping lustre in her eyes which told, unless I read them falsely, that when roused by passion, she would be capable of the deeds of Joan of Arc."

"A fawn, and yet a tigress," said the sergeant, with approval. "I like them so, myself. Well, comrade," he continued, laying his hand upon the other's shoulder, "will you take my counsel?"

"If it be good, I will."

"It is good: that I swear. And it is brief, and therefore should be easy."

"Well?"

"Forget her."

"Ah!" said the captain, with a face of pain. "You mock me, comrade. But how can I expect that you would understand?

What words can give a hint of the least of her perfections, when the very eyes that see them cannot do them justice? Surely never in the world was there a face so sweet and noble! And the dazzling whiteness of her skin, set off by the jet blackness of her hair!"

At this rhapsody the sergeant looked at his companion with wide eyes. "I thought," he said, slowly—"I thought you said that you were not a poet."

"If I am," said Hilary, "then all that is required to be a poet is to be in love with such a lady."

"I should like to see her, comrade," said the sergeant. A statement so superfluous made the captain smile at its absurdity. As if there ever breathed a man who would not like to see her!

"You sought for her, of course?" said Philip.

"Of course," returned the other. "For days—for weeks—I strove to trace her. All in vain."

"Ah," said Philip, musing, "I remember you were queer about that time. I remember your mysterious disappearances at all hours when you were off duty. We all guessed that it was a love-affair of some kind, of course, but no one dreamed that it was anything in earnest. And you have never found a clue?"

"None—absolutely none. She was gone as utterly as if she had vanished from the earth, as an angel vanishes to Heaven, or at least had disappeared into some spot beyond my reach, as inaccessible, perchance, as yonder frowning donjon." And the speaker indicated with his finger the castle on the crag.

There was a dejection in his words and manner which, even in a man of Hilary's ardent and romantic character, showed extreme intensity of feeling. It was not lost on his companion.

"Courage, comrade, courage," he said, with more show of sympathy than might

have been expected from a man whom thirty years of military life had hardened into iron. "You will find her yet. I shall live to dance at your wedding. Mark my words. I am a true prophet—now and then. But," he continued, willing, with a true instinct, to divert the current of his companion's thoughts; "touching that same donjon yonder; our worthy host may tell us something. Here he comes."

"True—true," said Hilary, rousing himself in an instant, and turning to the host, who was setting a flagon before Philip, "What do you know of Sir John Sombras? Is all true that one hears about him? Is he so bold, so terrible, so merciless, as all men say?"

The pallid features of the host appeared to turn a shade more ashen at this reference to the owner of the castle, under whom he lived in fear and trembling. Eager though he was to propitiate his guests, he looked round stealthily, as if dreading to be overheard, before replying to the question.

"You see his castle yonder?" he said, pointing to it.

"Yes."

"Do you know what it is called?"

"Yes," said Hilary; "Castle Sombras, is it not?"

The landlord dropped his voice still lower. "We who live here," he said, "know it by another name."

"And that is?"

"The Lion's Den."

"The Lion's Den," repeated Hilary. "I like the title. And the owner, doubtless, is the lion?"

The landlord shuddered visibly.

"He is more terrible than any lion. If you fall into his power, God save you!"

"Amen!" said Hilary. "But I do not mean to fall into his power."

For some moments there was silence, while all three looked upwards at the castle, black as ink against the evening sky. Hilary was the first to speak.

"I think," he said, "that if the Devil himself lived in a castle, it would look like Castle Sombras."

The landlord crossed himself. "The Devil does live there," he said. "Hush! It is not safe to speak of him aloud. He is not only as bold and cruel, but as cunning, as the very fiend himself."

"Well," said Hilary, taking Philip's flagon from the table; "I should like to see him. Here's to our speedy meeting!" and he took a deep potation in honour of the toast.

The landlord was about to make some reply, when the attention of all three was attracted by an incident which was passing at the angle of the road at which the sentinel was posted. A man, coming down the road in the direction in which Hilary had returned from reconnoitring a little while before, had been encountered by the sentry with his halberd lowered and the challenge:

"Who goes there? Halt! No one passes here."

The man thus stopped wore a soft slouched hat, and a long blue cloak reaching nearly to the heels, and carried, slung across his shoulder, the guitar or cithern of a wandering minstrel. He replied to the sentry's challenge with an air of real or feigned surprise.

"What! I must not pass! Why, we poor singing vagabonds pass everywhere, and are welcome."

"Not here," replied the soldier, curtly. "Come! Begone!"

And, as the man still hesitated, he thrust the butt-end of his weapon against his breast, so that he recoiled a pace or two. Even then, however, the minstrel showed a strange persistence, which would speedily have brought the weapon's point against him, had not Hilary, raising his voice, shouted to the sentry, "Let him pass." The soldier raised his halberd, and gave right of passage to the minstrel, who, with a sidelong grin of triumph at the sentry, came forward, saying:

"Thanks, noble captain!"

Hilary turned to his companion.

"What he says is true," he said. "These wandering minstrels go everywhere. He may have been inside the castle. He may tell us something."

"True," said Philip, with approval. And the two waited for the minstrel to come up.

As he did so, it was observed that he was a man of apparently about five and thirty, with a complexion almost as swarthy as a Moor's, a cropped black beard, a pair of restless, glittering eyes, and a broad, powerful frame, which his blue robe ill concealed. His expression was one in which a feigned humility seemed struggling with a native pride and arrogance, and not entirely with success—for the whole aspect of the man, notwithstanding his manifest desire to conciliate the observers, had something in it which an observant eye would have found singularly forbidding, and, in common parlance, "bad to quarrel with." The evening light was not, however, favourable to minute examina-

tion, and his appearance excited no unusual interest in two out of the three observers.

But with the third—the landlord — the case was widely different. At the first appearance of the minstrel—or, rather, at the first accents of his voice—he had started violently. Then he had remained standing motionless, like a man transformed to stone.

"Host!" said Hilary, without turning. "Bring a flagon of good liquor for this minstrel here."

"By your leave, captain," said the minstrel, whose keen black eyes were fastened on the landlord, "I will tell him what to bring." And stepping to the landlord's side, he muttered in his ear, "Hush, fool! I wish to learn with my own eyes and ears what they are going to do. One word—a nod—a glance — and you are lost. Begone! Remember," he said aloud, tapping the landlord on the breast with his forefinger, "burnt sherry—not canary."

The landlord almost staggered towards the

tavern door. There he paused an instant and cast a glance of terror over his shoulder at the minstrel.

"Good heavens!" he muttered, under his breath, as he disappeared into the doorway. "It is himself!—it is no vision! It is Sir John Sombras in disguise!"

CHAPTER II

THE SPY

THE pretended minstrel turned to the two soldiers.

The little scene had passed without attracting their attention, the burly figure of the minstrel, as for the present we will continue to call him, having half concealed the shrinking landlord from their view. It was quite without suspicion, therefore, that he was entertaining his formidable enemy unawares, that Hilary, with a gesture of the hand, invited him to seat himself upon a stool on the other side of the table.

"Listen," he said, "and answer clearly what I am going to ask you. Are you of these parts, or are you a stranger here?"

The minstrel bent his keen black eyes upon the soldiers.

"I am a stranger everywhere," he said. "I am a wanderer—here to-day, gone to-morrow. But I know these parts well."

"You know the castle yonder? You have been inside it?"

"Often," said the minstrel, readily.

"Come, then," said the captain, leaning forward, "you can help us. You know the owner—Sir John Sombras?"

The minstrel hesitated, but only for a moment.

"Yes," he said. "That is, I have seen him."

"You have been inside the castle; you have played and sung there, I suppose? You have had opportunities of making observations?"

"Yes."

"Consider, then," said Hilary; "what is their strength?"

The minstrel bent his brows as if in deep reflection.

"Forty men-at-arms," he said, at length.

"Forty!" cried Hilary. "Be careful, rascal. I know there are not half that number."

The minstrel's eyes opened wide, with an air of wonder at the other's anger.

"Well, captain," he replied, in a tone of deep simplicity; "doubtless you know best. I am no soldier. Do you intend," he continued, in the tone of one who asks a casual question in which he takes no lively interest —"do you intend to take the castle?"

The captain laughed a little grimly.

"Perhaps," he said.

"And to take the owner prisoner, no doubt?" said the other, still more carelessly than before. "Well, I wish you fortune, captain. I am no soldier; but I never could have believed that Castle Sombras could be stormed. But perhaps," he added, in a voice of the same easy nonchalance, though his eyes were fixed upon the captain's with a gaze which seemed to read his very soul—"perhaps you mean to starve them out?"

The captain returned the gaze with equal keenness.

"No," he said slowly, narrowly observing the effect of his remark. "No, we must march to-morrow." Then, noting the slight movement which the other had been unable to repress, he added, sharply: "What! you start? Why do your eyes gleam? What matters it to you?"

"Nothing — nothing, captain," returned the other, endeavouring to retrieve his involuntary error by an exaggerated aspect of humility, and at the same time rising from his stool and twitching the strap of his guitar upon his shoulder, as if minded to resume his journey. But if such were his intention, he was disappointed.

"Stay, my friend," said Hilary, rising also, and laying a hand upon his shoulder, "Not so fast. Now you have learnt what you desire to know, you are in too great a hurry to be gone. You should act your part more skilfully."

"My part!" returned the other, with an aspect of extreme surprise.

"You have betrayed yourself. You think of going to the castle with these tidings, for which, no doubt, you expect a rich reward." Then, changing his voice to sudden fierceness, the captain added, "You are a spy!"

The minstrel scowled under his black brows.

"Zounds!" he muttered, with a snarl like that of a trapped wolf.

"A spy!" repeated the captain. "But spies should be too clever to be caught, and you are caught, my friend." He turned and shouted to the soldiers round the fire. Half a dozen of them came running at the summons. "Arrest this man!" he said.

But while the words were in his mouth, and before the troopers could rush across the road, the minstrel had had time to get a start of them. He cast a lightning glance about him, and noted that the sentinel who had barred his passage at the angle of the

road alone prevented him from making a bold rush for freedom. In an instant he had drawn a pistol from beneath his cloak, and darting towards the sentry, fired full in the man's face. The sentry fell, leaving the way open, and for an instant it looked as if the fugitive were free.

But only for an instant; the next moment it was seen that the halberd of the wounded man, escaping from his grasp and falling right across the track, had caught the minstrel's flying feet, and brought him to the ground. A fierce yell of exultation arose from the pursuers. In an instant they were upon him, and had dragged him roughly to his feet.

"Bring him here," said the captain, sternly. Then calling to the soldiers who were raising the injured sentry, he inquired, "Is Matthew badly hurt?"

The soldier who had raised the sentry's head laid it back upon the ground.

"Dead, captain," he replied.

"Dead!" exclaimed the captain, turning fiercely to the prisoner. "Assassin!"

From the peaceful nature of the minstrel's calling, and from his effort to escape, the captain had expected him to display some signs of fear. But, although he had put forth all his resources in attempting to escape, it was evident that the captive had no lack of courage. On the contrary, now that hope was over, now that he stood amidst a crowd of enemies, clutched by savage hands, with certain death before him, breathless, daubed with dirt, his robe torn, and the blood trickling down his forehead from a cut above the eye, he showed no sign of terror. The resemblance to a hunted beast had vanished as soon as effort was in vain and nothing was left but to endure with fortitude what was to follow. Such is the respect in which the courage of a man excels the courage of the wolf and tiger.

"Assassin!" said the captain.

"Peace! peace!" returned the prisoner,

lightly. "Keep your breath to cool your broth—or at least to order out your men. Come; waste no time." He turned to Philip as he spoke. "Bring out your firing-party, sergeant."

"What are you doing?" said the sergeant, in surprise.

"I am waiting for the firing-party," said the captive, calmly.

"You are a bold rascal," said the sergeant, not without a touch of admiration in his voice. "You shall not be kept waiting long." With these words he crossed the road and disappeared among the tents.

"A bold rascal, truly," said the captain. "You ought to have been a soldier. Have you anything to ask of me before you die?"

"Yes," replied the captive, "I have one request."

"What is it?"

"What the sergeant has already promised me—not to be kept waiting."

"I will give you five minutes," said the

other. "You can employ them in charging the sergeant with your last wishes. You may have a mother, a wife, children."

"Neither," said the minstrel; "and for a prisoner who is about to die——"

"Where is the prisoner?" interrupted the sergeant, returning with five soldiers bearing fire-arms, and two drummers with their drums.

"Here!" replied the captive, turning round. "He is waiting for you." Then, turning again to the captain, he resumed his interrupted sentence with as much coolness as if nothing had occurred: "For a man who is about to die, as I am, it is a consolation to leave nothing behind him but an old cloak and a guitar." As he spoke, he looked up at the castle on the heights, and his features contracted for an instant. To one who held the key to that expression it said clearly: "And that! I am leaving that—and all that it contains! Heaven and earth! Destruction on these dogs and vermin!" But in less time than

the words could have been uttered the expression passed, as he turned again to those who held him, at the same time drawing a little pouch from beneath his robe.

"Sergeant," he said, calmly, "in this purse are five gold pieces—all the wealth I have in the world. Hark, my men: the sergeant will divide half this money among you if I fall dead at the first volley. If I make a movement, he will keep it all himself."

The self-possession with which he made this dreadful bargain impressed even the rough troopers. A murmur from the group attested that they understood him, and would earn the money.

"Give me a kerchief," said the prisoner.

The sergeant produced one.

"Here it is," he said.

"Good," replied the prisoner, taking it and binding it across his eyes. "Where must I kneel?"

"Here!" said the sergeant, taking him by the arm and leading him, still surrounded by

the men who had first seized him, towards the broad trunk of a poplar tree which grew beside one corner of the building. The firing-party remained standing where they were.

"Kneel down," said the sergeant.

The prisoner knelt.

"Wait!" said Hilary, who had resumed his seat at the table. "Search him first; bring me what you find."

The sergeant nodded. A brief search sufficed to bring to light the prisoner's few possessions. These consisted of a knife in a carved sheath, of better workmanship than might have been expected, a powder-horn, five loose leaden bullets, a tinder-box, and an oval leather case, which the sergeant did not stay to open. Placing these articles on the table before Hilary, he returned to the prisoner, who was standing, with his eyes still bandaged, under the poplar tree, surrounded by his guards.

The sergeant took him by the arm. "Kneel down," he said.

"Grant me only an instant," said the prisoner. "Let me look round once more." He raised the kerchief as he spoke, the sergeant making no objection, and cast a long look round him. As before, his eyes dwelt on the castle on the crag, and his features twitched with the same passing spasm. Then he replaced the bandage and knelt down, crossing his arms upon his breast. The soldiers fell away, leaving his solitary figure kneeling before the tree. The firing-party was about twelve paces distant. The sergeant gave a signal with his hand.

A roll sounded on the drums. The soldiers drew up in line.

A second roll. The soldiers made ready.

A third roll. They raised their pieces and took aim.

At that instant, just as the last roll of the drums was on the point of giving the signal to fire, a loud cry from the captain stopped the drumsticks in mid-air.

He had been sitting at the table, glancing

somewhat carelessly at the prisoner's articles of property, which seemed commonplace enough. That a man of peaceable profession should carry fire-arms was not remarkable in those troubled times. The knife he took up, wondering a little at the value of the carved sheath, and then, laying it down again, he turned to an examination of the leather case.

This case, which, it has been said, was of an oval shape, measured about a finger's length the longest way, and was secured by a snap or catch of a metal which resembled silver, and which was so ingeniously contrived as to baffle all his attempts to open it. At last he was obliged to take his dagger, and, forcing the point beneath the clasp, to wrench it open by a sharp turn of the wrist. The obstacle had served to whet his curiosity as to the contents of a case so closely guarded; nor was this feeling lessened when he drew from the interior the portrait of a lady painted in miniature on an ivory plate.

At the first instant his sensations, as he gazed on the features of the portrait, were those of curiosity only. The next moment he started to his feet with the cry which had arrested the signal of the drums.

"Ground arms!" he shouted, in a voice of thunder.

The firing-party lowered their pieces, amazed at the unaccountable excitement of their captain.

"Go!" he continued, with a gesture of command. "I must speak to the prisoner alone."

The soldiers withdrew, and, crossing the road, mingled with the figures which, in the closing twilight, were gathered round the fire. Hilary waited, quivering with impatience, until he was alone with the captive, who was still kneeling at the foot of the tree. Then, darting up to him, he tore off his bandage and dragged him to his feet.

"Speak!" he said, with a kind of passionate eagerness. "Look at this portrait. Where did you get it? Speak!"

The prisoner stared about him, but returned no answer.

"What is the matter?" said the captain.

"Nothing!" said the other. "Wait; I am dizzy." The bitterness of death had drawn and peaked his features. He drew his breath in sharply, and struck himself a blow or two upon the chest. "Ha!" he said, speaking like a man who had been running and was still a little out of breath. "What did you say?"

"Whose is this portrait? Where did you get it? I have spared your life—if you answer me fully and freely, you are safe."

The prisoner glanced from the portrait to the captain's face, and an idea seemed to strike him suddenly. His full faculties were instantly alive again. In a tone of forced simplicity he said:

"You would like to see that lady?"

"Yes!" said the captain, eagerly. "Yes! —yes!"

"I can show you where she lives."

"Where?"

The prisoner turned, and pointing to the castle on the crag, responded, like the answer of an echo: "There!"

"In Castle Sombras?" said Hilary, amazed.

"In Castle Sombras."

"Who is she, then?"

"She is the ward of Sir John Sombras."

"The ward of Sir John Sombras!" cried the captain, recoiling back a pace or two, as one who had received a shock. Then, starting forward and seizing the other by the arm, he demanded with vehemence, "Have you seen her? Is she happy."

"I have seen her," was the answer. "No; she is not happy."

"Does she seem to pine?—to brood?—to be thinking of an absent lover, it may be?"

"Exactly," said the other, looking at him curiously, "of an absent lover!" The expression of his features said as plainly as

words, "What the devil does he know of her?"

"She thinks of me," said Hilary to himself, with rapture. "She loves me still." Aloud he added, "How did you gain possession of this portrait?"

"She gave it to me," said the minstrel.

"She gave it to you, rascal!" cried the captain, angrily.

"She was good enough to like my music. She was so gracious as to grant me what reward I asked; and I asked this."

"Then you asked more than your deserts, and more than any man's deserts," returned the captain. "Were you not afraid that she would order her lackeys to kick you out of the castle, in return for your presumption? Ha!" he continued to himself, fixing his eyes upon the portrait in his hand, "At last I have found her! And now that I have found her, she is as far off as if she were in Heaven!"

The minstrel watched him keenly.

"Would you like to see her?" he demanded.

The captain turned upon him.

"Peace, rascal, with your untimely jests!" he cried. "Would I like to see her? I would give my life to see her!"

The other paused a moment. Then he laid his hand upon the captain's arm and peered into his face.

"Listen! But, no"—he broke off suddenly—"it is useless. You would have to run some danger. Your words are only breath—you mean nothing."

The captain seized his wrist with passion, his eyes gleaming.

"Speak, fool!" he said.

His impetuosity was not lost upon the keen observer, who instantly took advantage of it.

"If I tell you," he said, "how you may see her in an hour from the present time, will you swear to set me free?"

"I will," said Hilary. "If your proposal

is one possible to follow, you shall go safe and free."

"You swear it? By your hopes of Heaven?—by your honour as a soldier?"

"By my hopes of Heaven—by my honour as a soldier," said Hilary, drawing his dagger and pressing the cross-hilt to his lips, "I swear it."

The minstrel's eyes gleamed with the fierce joy of coming triumph.

"Take this robe," he said, rapidly, "to hide your uniform; and sling this instrument across your shoulder. Go boldly to the drawbridge, show this portrait to the warder, tell him that you have a message to the Lady Thyrza, and he will admit you instantly."

"Give me the robe!" cried the impetuous lover, without the hesitation of an instant. "You are free."

Seizing the robe which the minstrel stripped off, he threw it round him, fastening the button at the neck, and calling loudly at the same time, "Philip! Philip!"

The form of the sergeant was seen to detach itself from the circle round the fire and to cross the road towards them.

"Philip," said Hilary, as he came up, "the prisoner is free."

"What?" said the other, as if he could not trust his ears.

"The prisoner must go free," repeated Hilary.

"He must go free!"

"He has given me a piece of priceless information, by which I trust to gain admittance to the castle."

"You are going to the castle?" said the sergeant. "Alone?"

"Alone. I can take no one with me. And why should I not go?"

"Because it is useless," returned the other, strongly. "Because you will risk your life for nothing. Because it is the lion's den—or, rather, because the devil himself lives there."

"Not the true one," said Hilary, lightly. "You see the Abbey yonder? The true

Prince of Darkness does not live so near the sound of vespers, and I shall not fear a sham one."

"But how do you know that this man is not a traitor?"

"I do not know," said Hilary; "but I shall know soon. If I gain admittance, he will have kept his promise. If I do not, I shall return and shall have run no danger."

This reply by no means served to cool the sergeant's perturbation for his comrade's safety.

"And what if you do gain admittance?" he said. "What if you do not return?"

"Then you will march without me—I will follow, if I can. Come, Philip, you know well enough that you would do the same."

"I know nothing of the sort," replied the sergeant, hotly; "and I have never been called a coward either. What do you expect to do there?"

At this home-question Hilary reddened. He expected to see the lady of his love,

and that was all-sufficient for him; but he knew well enough that in strict duty he had no right to risk his life for his own ends, without reasonable prospect of furthering the object which he was commissioned to fulfil. And in his heart he did not think that such a reasonable prospect existed. He answered, however, as carelessly as if he had no qualm of conscience which he desired to stifle :—

"Who knows what I may do there? I may capture Sir John Sombras single-handed. At any rate, I mean to see him, and to know if report speaks truly of the lion and his den."

"This is madness," said the sergeant, on whose spirit a presentiment of evil seemed to weigh to a degree which Hilary had never seen in him before. "This is madness—you shall not go!"

"Shall not, Philip?" returned the other, smiling, but with a dignity which carried its effect. "Am I the captain of this troop?" The sergeant made a gesture of assent.

"Then hear my orders. The prisoner must go free—I have pledged my faith upon it. And now, farewell, old friend."

He extended his hand as he spoke. The other grasped it warmly in his own.

"Farewell, Hilary," he said, huskily, "if you will go. The saints send you safely back again." Then, as if afraid to trust himself to say another word, he turned away and crossed the road towards the camp.

During this conversation the minstrel had stood motionless a little apart from the two friends, with his eyes bent upon them as piercingly as those of a wild beast upon the prey which he is not yet assured will fall into his power. It was not until the sergeant turned away that he stirred slightly and drew a long, free breath.

"I have got him," he said within himself, with an evil gleam in his black eyes. "I have got him in my clutches—safe."

Hilary was looking at the portrait in his hand.

"I have found her!" he reflected, giddy with delight, as if he had been drinking wine. "I am going to see her!" He pressed the portrait to his lips, and thrusting it into his breast, looked up at the dark castle on the summit of the crag.

"And now," he said, aloud, "to Castle Sombras! To the lion's den!"

The minstrel, whom he had in his excitement quite forgotten, remained standing in the same position until the captain's figure became lost to sight beyond the angle of the road, in the direction which would bring him to the foot of the ascent. Then, stealthily and cautiously, he set himself to follow.

"And now," he muttered, with a mocking echo of the captain's words, but in a tone of savage triumph in violent contrast to the lover's ecstasy—"and now—to Castle Sombras! To the lion's den!"

CHAPTER III

A LOVERS' MEETING

WHILE these events were passing—while Hilary, with the portrait in his breast, was climbing the precipitous ascent towards the drawbridge—the lady of the portrait was sitting alone in her apartment in the castle.

The room was not by any means so sombre as might have been expected from the outward aspect of the castle. It was lighted by large waxen torches set in brazen sconces; and the carved and massive chairs and table, the panels of black oak which lined the walls, the distaff with its tuft of glistening flax, and the glowing wool-work on the tambour-frame, gave back a rich and warm reflection of their lustre, as well as of the firelight gleaming from the huge open chimney and

twinkling cheerfully upon the immense brass dogs which stood on either side of it. The chamber had two doors, one of which opened on the corridor outside; while the other, which was that of Thyrza's bedroom, was situated in one of the recesses near the fire-place. Opposite the chief door was a large window opening on a wide stone balcony, with ramparts, beyond which could be seen, far off, the rising moon.

Thyrza was sitting, dreamy and dejected, between the window and the fire, beside a little table, on which lay a backgammon board. Her beauty, which her lover's ardour had not over-painted, had lost something of its glow since he had seen her. Her cheeks were now too pale, her large dark eyes too full of melancholy. Her slender figure drooped, as if despair had touched it. Hilary had predicted of her that, if roused by love and passion, she would be capable of deeds of daring. He was quite right. But to any one who had seen her only at that moment,

his judgment must have seemed a lover's fantasy.

She was, it has been said, alone. But presently the inner door opened and an elderly waiting-woman, with grey hair and grave but kindly features, entered the apartment.

"Are you ready for your game, my lady?" she inquired.

The question startled Thyrza from her reverie.

"Yes, Matilda," she replied. "Anything to keep myself from thinking. And you are ready, I see, as usual, to try your fortune against mine. Come, then."

She arranged the pieces on the backgammon-board as she was speaking, and then, taking up the dice-box, she shook it in the air in act to throw. Suddenly, however, instead of doing so, she let it fall upon the table and pressed her hands against her eyes.

"No," she said, "I cannot play, Matilda. My spirits are too low to-night."

A Lovers' Meeting

Matilda looked at her young mistress with anxiety. She seemed perplexed.

"If you are sad, my lady," she replied, "who then should be happy? Have you not everything that heart can wish?"

"Everything?" asked Thyrza, with a curious smile.

"Have you not everything, my lady? You are young, you are beautiful, you are the ward of a great lord, you are soon to be his wife——"

"Ah!" said Thyrza, with a sigh which had in it a world of meaning.

"Why do you sigh, my lady?"

Thyrza did not reply at once. For some minutes she sat looking at the fire. Then she turned to her companion, and said, with hesitation :—

"Matilda, were you ever, when you were young—were you ever in love?"

"I, my lady!" said the old woman in surprise; adding, in a lower tone, "Yes—once. But it is very long ago."

"Is it so long ago that you have forgotten what it was like?"

"No!" replied the other, with an emphasis at which, as soon as she had spoken, she reddened, as if ashamed.

"Ah!" said Thyrza, "you can understand me, then."

"Surely I can, my lady. You are in love?" Thyrza made a gesture of assent. "And what can be more fitting? Sir John Sombras is a most noble lord——"

"Pish!" said Thyrza, pettishly. "I see you do not understand me. Listen, Matilda —I must talk to some one—and I have no one else." She paused, and then added with deliberation, looking at her attendant as she spoke, as if to mark the effect of the communication: "I am not in love with Sir John Sombras."

The effect was not at all what she expected. Matilda showed no surprise.

"No, my lady," she answered, with a smile; "I know you are not. But you

wanted me to think you were, and I tried to seem to do so."

"And you knew all the time that I was not in love with him? Why, Matilda, you are a witch! But since you know so much, pray exert your gift of insight a little further and tell me whether I am going to marry him."

"Yes, my lady," said the waiting-woman. "I believe that you intend to marry him."

"And why?"

"Because he is a man who will not be refused."

"Nay, Matilda," said her mistress, "you are but half a sorceress, after all. I would refuse him, though he killed me for it, if I had any hope to live for. But I am alone in the world. I have no acquaintances—no friend—except you, my dear old nurse, who have cared for me so long, as if I were your own child. I am going to marry Sir John, though I neither love nor hate him. And it is true that I fear him—sometimes I fear

him horribly; but I have no strength of purpose to escape him. And what does it matter, after all? He will not kill me; or if he does—and he may, when he is weary of me—well, what then? I am no better than his prisoner. What have I to live for?"

For some moments there was silence. Then Matilda answered, in a low and almost timid voice:

"Have you nothing left to live for? No motive strong enough to keep you from this marriage? Are you sure, my lady?"

Thyrza looked at her with searching eyes.

"I see," she said, "you guess something of the truth. Well, I will tell you all!" She paused, and sat looking at the fire in silence for a minute or two. Then she resumed: "Last year, when I was taken on a visit to my aunt at York, before her death, I saw at church one day a young and handsome soldier—at least, to my eyes he was handsome, though

perhaps most girls would not have thought so. We met—oh, Matilda, if you have never felt it, no thought can teach you what it is to be young, to be lonely, and to be in love! I learnt his name—it was Hilary; I promised to meet him again, but I was closely watched, and I could not keep the tryst. Next day I was brought back to this castle."

"And you have never seen him since?" inquired the other, with the eager eyes with which every woman listens to a love-story.

"Never! Yes—once. That night, as I was looking from my window, I saw a figure in the moonlight, waiting, watching. Presently I heard a voice—I knew it well—begin to sing. When shall I forget—I never shall forget—the music or the words? I could sing them now; yes, I should like to sing them. Matilda, fetch my lute. I left it in the window of the hall."

Matilda rose and left the apartment on her errand. But she had hardly gone when a doubt occurred to Thyrza's mind that she

had sent her waiting-woman on a fruitless mission for the instrument required.

"Did I leave it there?" she reflected. "Did I. No, after all, I think I left it in my chamber. Yes, I remember—I will bring it here."

As she vanished into the bedroom, her retreating figure just caught the eyes of two persons who entered the apartment by the other door. One of these persons was Matilda. The other was Hilary Dare.

A warder, coming with Hilary up the corridor, and meeting Matilda on her way to fetch the lute, had committed him into her charge to be conducted to her mistress.

Everything had happened to Hilary exactly as the pretended minstrel had foretold. He had presented himself at the drawbridge, and, on producing his talisman, had been at once admitted by the warder, who had handed him over to a second guard, who, in his turn, had conducted him as far as the corridor of Thyrza's apartments, where

Matilda had met them, as above described. The adventure had so far passed off so easily, that Hilary, though his heart beat high with an expectation that was almost painful, had hardly realised the fact, that in a moment more he would be face to face with her whom he had sought so long, when he found himself standing within the door of her apartment, and, with a thrill which checked the current of his blood, had caught the glimpse of her retreating form.

"Wait here," said his conductor. She crossed the floor and knocked at the door of the inner chamber, saying, "A messenger for you, my lady."

The answer was inaudible to Hilary, but the waiting-woman, turning to him, said:

"My lady will be back immediately, and if, as you say, you have a message for her, you will be able to deliver it. I must find her lute." She hurried from the room as she was speaking, leaving Hilary alone.

He looked round the apartment. Signs of

her recent presence were everywhere. Her handkerchief was on the little table, where she had left it. Before him was the door, through which in another moment she would emerge. His heart beat fiercely. Never in moments of the direst peril had he felt this agitation. The very violence of his sensations recalled him to himself with a solicitude for her in like conditions.

"If she finds me here so suddenly," he thought, "she may be frightened. And perhaps she will not come alone. I had better watch my chance. Where can I place myself? Ha!" he continued, as his eyes fell on the window; "that will do." He moved across the room, and, stepping through the open window, pressed himself into a corner of the rampart which edged the little platform, or balcony, outside, so that from the interior of the room he was invisible in the shadow, while he was able to observe clearly everything that passed within.

He had hardly taken up his position when

the bedroom door opened and Thyrza entered the apartment. She cast a glance round her in expectation of seeing the messenger who had been announced, and of surprise at finding the room empty.

"Matilda did not understand me," she said to herself. "I said he was to wait. Well, she will bring him back with her, no doubt." And dismissing the matter from her mind, she took her seat on a low chair, and placed her lute, which she had brought with her, on her knees.

"Let me see," she said, softly, "whether I can sing his song."

She touched a few low chords, humming at the same time the air which she desired to try. Then her voice took up the words themselves :—

Love, Love, the captain glorious,
Has marched me in his lines,
Where sounds his trump victorious,
And where his banner shines.

She paused. "The next verse is the best,"

she murmured. "How I love it!—in which he told me that Love's trumpets speak my name, and that my face is blazoned on his banners. Oh, that I could hear him sing it now! Oh, that I could hear his voice once more, outside my window, as I heard it then!"

She started; the lute fell from her hand upon the floor. From outside the window came the sound of a voice singing, scarcely louder than if it were the echo of her own.

By all Love's trumpets gleaming
My lady's name is told!
On all his standards streaming
Her face is wrought in gold!

During the time the voice was singing Thyrza had sat spell-bound, her eyes fastened on the window. But the instant it was silent she started to her feet with a low, screaming cry.

"Hilary!"

"Thyrza!"

He stepped in at the window and she fell into his arms.

For some moments neither spoke. He could feel that she was trembling; he divined that joy and fear had struck her dumb. Then, all at once, her tongue was loosened, and the words came to her with a rush.

"Hilary!" she said, holding him off at arm's length that she might see him better; "you are here! Oh, heavens, I shall die of joy! But—but—I am frightened. How did you come here?—and in this dress? How did you gain admittance? Oh, you are in danger!—you have risked your life——!"

"No," said Hilary. "And if I had, what would it matter? I should have died if I had not seen you; now, if I die, I shall at least have seen you first. But have no fear; there is no reason why I should not leave the castle as easily as I entered it."

"Ah!" said Thyrza, with a long sigh of relief. "That is well. You are safe while you are here with me. No one will come here except Matilda, and I would trust her with our lives. But let me look at you—let

me see if you have changed. No, no! You are the same—the same—the same!"

The colour had mounted to her cheeks, and her eyes were glistening like stars. Her beauty at that moment was extraordinary. As for Hilary, he stood looking at her like a man in a trance, making the most of the few flying moments which he felt conscious could not last.

"And now tell me what you think of me," she said. "Oh, I know what you are going to say. I am changed—am I not? Well, I will tell you why: For a whole year, since I saw you, I have done nothing but cry. And what have you been doing all that time? Have you been as sad as I have? Have you thought of me a little? Tell me—tell me!"

"You ask me what I have been doing, Thyrza. I do not know. I have been dreaming an ill dream. But I have already half forgotten it, for now I am awake."

"And so am I! and so am I! Oh, how happy I am, Hilary! And I have so many

things to tell you. Come, let us sit down here." She drew him down beside her on a couch and pressed herself against his side. "Close together—closer!" she said. "Oh, Hilary, I have so many things to tell you! Where shall I begin? But, no!—we will not talk at all. Let us be still, quite still, and let me look at you. I only want to look at you, Hilary. Give me your hand."

"Give me yours," he said.

She did so. He took it in one of his, and stroked the back of it with the other. He wore a ring upon his little finger, and the sparkle of a jewel in it caught her eye.

"What a charming ring," she said.

Hilary drew it from his finger.

"I bought it for you," he said. "I meant to give it to you—that night. Will you wear it, Thyrza?"

He slipped it on her finger as he spoke.

"For ever!" she said. "For ever!" And she pressed it to her lips. As she looked up at him, he bent and kissed her. It was

the first time he had done so; and in that kiss, which seemed to set the seal upon their love, their hearts repeated Thyrza's vow—"For ever!"

"But now listen, dearest," said Hilary at last, forcing himself to speak with coolness, lest he should alarm her. "I have come to fetch you. Thyrza, time is pressing; there may be danger in delay. We can escape together, if you will. A priest from yonder monastery can marry us. But I forgot—I have not told you. I am a soldier still; I have come up from the camp below the castle. This dress, as you divined, is only a disguise. See," he continued, throwing open his gown, "I got it from a friend of yours, Thyrza."

Thyrza stared at him with open eyes.

"A friend of mine?" she repeated. "I have no friends."

At another moment the pathos of this answer would have touched him; he would have spent himself in passionate assurances that he would cherish her more dearly than a

world of friends. But there was something in her answer which struck him with a chill of indefinable misgiving.

"What," he said, "you have forgotten your old minstrel, Thyrza?—I do not know his name—who has played to you so often, and whom you like so well."

"An old minstrel?" repeated Thyrza, wonderingly.

"An old minstrel; yes. Do you not recognise his gown—his instrument? Look at them well."

"I never saw them, Hilary."

"Yes, yes! You have forgotten, Thyrza. Well, surely you remember the reward you gave him?"

Thyrza was looking frightened.

"Hilary," she said, "there is some strange mistake in this. I know no old minstrel."

"What, Thyrza? Think. Why, I took from him the very portrait which you gave him. It was that which gained me entrance to the castle."

"The portrait which I gave him?" repeated Thyrza, thoroughly alarmed.

"Yes. Here it is. Your portrait." And as he spoke he drew it from his breast.

The girl recoiled from it as if she had seen a serpent.

"Hilary," she said quickly, "where is this minstrel? Is he your prisoner, did you say, or is he free?"

"Why, he was my prisoner," said Hilary, regarding her with wonder. "But he showed me how to gain admittance to the castle, and I set him free."

"Ah!" said Thyrza, almost with a scream. "I see it!—I see it all! Hilary, you are caught—you are betrayed. This was no minstrel."

"How? What?" said Hilary. "Who was he?"

"That portrait belongs to Sir John Sombras. It was he in that disguise?"

"Ah!" said Hilary, more startled than he cared to show. For some moments he

sat muttering to himself: "Fool! fool that I was! Now I see why he showed relief when he learned that we must march to-morrow. But come!" he added, suddenly returning to himself, "there may be time yet. We may escape. He may not have returned. Come, my love. Courage, and all may yet be well. But," he continued, as an idea seemed to strike him, while he looked at her with a sudden change of manner, "Thyrza, how came he with your portrait?—by what right?"

"I gave it to him," said Thyrza, simply.

"You gave it to him?" he echoed. All remembrance of their situation—the perils which environed them—had vanished from him in an instant. His eyes shone with jealousy. So whimsical a thing is the spirit of a lover.

"Listen, Hilary," she answered, laying her hand upon his sleeve and looking up into his face with earnest eyes. "I never loved him—now I hate him. But I feared him; he

asked me to be his wife; I was alone in the world—I never thought to see you again—and I consented."

Hilary started back as if he had been struck, as a dreadful terror crossed his mind.

"You are not—married?" he gasped out.

"No, no; not yet. But," she added, pressing his arm and looking up into his face with the demurest smile, "but I am going to be, my love."

"Thank Heaven!" said Hilary. "Then all is well."

The words had scarcely left his lips when a slight noise behind them made them both look round. There, at the door, a man stood looking at them, with an evil smile upon his lips.

The man was Sir John Sombras.

CHAPTER IV

A GAME OF DICE

FOR some moments the two lovers stood as if struck motionless, staring at the figure in the doorway. How long he had been there—how much of their conversation he had overheard—they did not know. It was soon made evident, however, that Hilary's last words, at any rate, had not escaped him. He repeated them with a mocking laugh.

"All is well?" he said, taking a step forward as he spoke. "All is well, you think? Then no doubt you are prepared for what is going to follow? Fool!" he continued, in an indescribable tone, half-threat, half-banter. "Fool! Caught like a trapped rat, and now to die like one."

At the first utterance of his voice, Thyrza

as if by instinct, had shrunk back behind her lover. But at these words, before Hilary had time to answer, she started forward and confronted Sombras face to face.

"No!" she cried, "you shall not touch him!" Her hands were clenched—her eyes were wide with terror.

Sombras looked at her with his cold smile and gleaming eyes.

"What?" he said. "And why should you desire to save him?"

"Why?" she echoed, passionately. "Because I love him—because he loves me. Swear you will not touch him! He is my lover—if you touch him you will kill me."

"Ha!" said Sombras, slowly, "I knew that this man was my enemy—now it seems he is my rival. Every word you have just spoken helps to seal his fate."

She had spoken as the impulse drove her, wildly—blindly: but as he spoke, she realised her error. She recoiled as if she had received a blow, and uttered a sharp cry.

Sombras took another step towards her, so that his dark face and piercing eyes were close to hers.

"Listen," he said; "you have revealed your secret. It is most fortunate for my purpose. I could not, I did not expect this——"

"Nor this," a voice said suddenly behind him.

Sombras started and looked round. Between him and the door stood Hilary Dare, with his finger on the trigger of his pistol, which he had drawn from underneath his cloak.

"Stir but so much as a finger," he continued, sternly, "and you are a dead man."

Sombras muttered a curse of anger and surprise. He was taken completely unawares. Intent upon his conference with Thyrza, he had put the game into his adversary's hands. His fingers stole to his side in search of his own pistol—but it was gone. Then for the first time he remembered that he had dropped it after firing at the sentry,

and that he was absolutely unarmed. It was true that with a shout he could bring a dozen guards running at hot speed to his assistance; but he would be a dead man before they came. He grinned with rage.

"Villain!" he said. "You would assassinate me?"

It was characteristic of the man that he showed no sign of quailing. If he had the nature of a demon, he had the courage of one also.

"No," said Hilary: "I would kill you, but not as an assassin kills. Have you a pistol?"

"No."

"I will give you an equal chance for life with mine. We will draw lots for this pistol. Whoever wins will shoot the other dead. Is it agreed?"

Sombras stared. For a moment he made no answer. The chivalry of the proposal took him by surprise.

"You hesitate?" demanded Hilary. "You refuse my offer?"

"No," said Sombras; "I accept it."

Hilary turned towards the girl, who had listened to this conversation breathlessly; full of admiration for her lover, but trembling for his safety.

"Thyrza," he said, "I see dice yonder. I do not choose to quit this pistol. You must cast them for us. If he wins, I will give up the pistol. If I win, he will die."

For a moment Thyrza hesitated. The dice-box was lying on the backgammon-board, where she had thrown it down. With sudden resolution she walked up to the board, and taking up the caster, put the dice into it with shaking fingers. Her back was for a moment turned to the two men.

"Grant me, saints and angels," she whispered, "that I may save my lover!" Then she turned round, with the dice-box in her hand, and advanced to the large table.

"Throw first for him," said Hilary. "The best of three throws wins."

The three were now grouped round the

larger table, Hilary standing at the end nearest the door, Thyrza at the side towards the fireplace, and Sombras facing her across the table. Suspense and expectation held them all three breathless. Thyrza's hand which held the dice-box trembled so, that, in the utter silence of the room, the dice could be heard rattling inside it. And then the game began—the strange and deadly game in which the stakes were a man's life.

Thyrza threw the dice upon the table. Three pairs of eyes were fixed with the intensest eagerness upon them, as they tumbled over and over, rattling on the board, until they became motionless. One of the little ivory cubes showed upon its upturned face four points—the other, two.

"Six!" cried the three spectators, so exactly at the same instant that the exclamations sounded like one word.

"Now throw for me," said Hilary.

Thyrza took up the dice, replaced them in the caster, and again tossed them on the table.

"Seven!" said the three voices, exactly as before.

Sombras scowled upon the dice as if they had been living beings who had injured him. "He wins!" he muttered in his teeth.

"He wins!" cried Thyrza, joyfully. "Thank God—he wins!"

"The first throw is mine," said Hilary, calmly. "But all is not yet over; he may win the other two. Come, love! Again."

Thyrza took up the dice to throw for Sombras. She was again elate with hope; her lips were almost smiling. In her heart she prayed that the number to be thrown might prove a low one. An observer, who, without ever looking on the table, had kept his eyes upon the faces round it, could have been certain, the instant the dice fell upon the board, that her prayer had been fulfilled. Her face brightened with relief. Sombras scowled again and bit his lip until the blood came. The total of the points was only three.

The odds were now enormously in Hilary's favour—indeed, it was barely possible that he should lose; for the throw was the lowest, except one, which could be reckoned on a pair of dice. Thyrza's eyes were bright with confidence as she shook the caster and prepared to throw for Hilary. Sombras looked on with a gloomy frown. His face showed clearly that he felt his chance was over.

The dice rattled on the table. For a moment there was a pause of suspense, and then of stupefaction. Upon each of the two upturned faces of the dice appeared a solitary point. Sombras, after all, had won the throw.

Thyrza broke into a cry. Sombras uttered not a syllable, but with a gleam of his dark eyes he dashed one clenched fist into the other palm. Hilary showed the least emotion of the three. He was absorbed in watching Thyrza.

"That is one throw each," he said, speaking with forced lightness. "Come, now for the deciding cast."

The confidence with which he compelled himself to speak was not lost upon the girl. She nerved herself, though not without an obvious effort, and again took up the caster, which she had let fall upon the table. Once more the dice dropped rattling on the board. They scored eight points for Sombras.

The aspect of the game was now completely altered. This throw gave Sombras the advantage, though not to any marked degree. The highest number of points which it was possible to cast was, of course, twelve—two sixes—and it was more likely that the points at the next trial would be under eight than over it. Still, the chance of fortune was so open that the tension of suspense became more painful than before, as Thyrza took the dice-box in her hand to throw for Hilary.

"Eight!" she murmured. "Eight! Oh, will it come to more than eight this time? It must! It shall!"

She threw the dice upon the table. One

of them marked five—the other, bouncing on the hard board, with the uncertain motion of such objects, jumped beyond the edge and fell upon the floor, where none of them could see it from the places where they were standing.

"Cast again," said Sombras.

"No," said Hilary, "there is no need. Look at it, Thyrza. Tell us what the number is."

The girl passed round the table, stooped down at the further end of it, and looked about upon the floor. At first she could see nothing. Then all at once, beside a table-leg, her eye alighted on the tiny cube. It was lying in the full light of a candle, and she could see the points upon it clearly—Three.

Three! And the other on the table marked a five—the total counted eight. It was the same as she had thrown for Sombras.

Her heart beat quickly; but it was not surprise at the coincidence which stirred its

current, but an almost irresistible impulse which seized her at the moment. What if she should seize the dice, exclaiming: "I have found it'!—it is a four!" The total would be nine; her lover would be saved. For, however Sombras might protest, Hilary would certainly accept her word. Had the number been a two, by which Hilary would have lost, the temptation might have proved too great for her. Even as it was she paused so long that the voice of Hilary was heard saying, "Well, Thyrza, have you found it?"

She put away the impulse with a violent effort.

"Yes!" she answered, rising.

"What is the number?"

"It is a three," she said. To herself she added, "If he loses the next throw, I shall have killed him!"

"A three!" repeated Hilary. "Then we are still quits. Thyrza, you must throw for each of us again. Come! for the last time. This will certainly decide it."

Thyrza picked up the dice, and, returning to her former position at the table, threw them both into the caster. Then, as if anxious to prevent a recurrence of the accident, she inverted the box quickly on the board, so that the dice were concealed beneath it. When she lifted it, a simultaneous exclamation broke from all the three: —

"Eleven!"

"I win!" said Sombras, "unless she throws a twelve—and she will not throw a twelve, except by a miracle. But"—he muttered to himself, fixing his dark eyes suspiciously on Hilary—"but will he keep his word?"

Hilary turned to Thyrza. The strain was almost more than she could bear. She was very pale and trembled violently. He feared that she would fall.

"My poor love!" he said. "Come, courage, dearest. Throw for me."

The girl took up the dice-box to throw for the last time. But suddenly she flung

it down upon the table, with the dice inside it.

"I cannot!" she burst out. "Oh, I cannot! It is too horrible. Oh, if I should not throw a twelve!—and it will not be a twelve—I know it will not!"

"Come, then," said Hilary, "give me the caster. I must make the throw myself." And he extended his left hand to take the dice-box, keeping his pistol still ready in his right.

"No!" she cried, retaining it. "No! I will throw. My love will bring us good fortune. It must!—it must!"

She paused a moment, while her lips moved, though no sound came from them. Then, with a movement so sudden that it was almost a convulsion, she threw the dice for the last time upon the table.

All three, strung up to the last pitch of tension by the feeling that the end of the strange game had come at last, fastened their eyes upon the falling dice. They danced

upon the board—they came to rest—the points upon the faces became visible. Ten!

Ten! Hilary had lost.

Thyrza staggered back, half fainting.

"I have killed him," she muttered to herself, half incoherently. "I have killed my lover!"

Sombras uttered a fierce cry of triumph and turned suddenly to Hilary.

"I have won!" he cried. "Give me the pistol."

"You have won," repeated Hilary, calmly, handing him the weapon. "Take it."

CHAPTER V

A BLINDFOLD DUEL

SOMBRAS clutched the pistol with an eager hand. When he found it in his grasp, and not till then, he broke into a grin of satisfaction. His adversary was now absolutely in his power. He might put a bullet through his heart at once, or he might call the guards and have him seized and locked up in a cell until he had determined what was best to do with him. He held the pistol in his hand, looking the while at Hilary, but not seeing him, as he turned the question over in his mind. As for Thyrza, he had half-forgotten her existence.

The rustle of her dress, as she rose from the couch where she had flung herself, recalled her presence to his mind. She

desired, apparently, to leave the chamber, an intention which he saw with satisfaction, for the presence of a woman in such matters was by no means to his mind. Accordingly, he made no movement to detain her as she approached the door, near which he was now standing.

Her action seemed so natural that no suspicion made him notice her with more than ordinary attention. To him she seemed in no way different from the girl who had just sunk down half-fainting on the couch. She stood unsteadily; when she walked she almost staggered. But a close observer would have perceived that she was quite a different being. There are some women who only require a time of trial to make them fit to meet it; and such a one was Thyrza. Despair had begun, as her lover had predicted, to change her nature—to harden it to resolution. The weakness, which at the first moment had been real, was now assumed—was being acted for a purpose. She tottered

as she crossed the room towards the spot where Sombras stood, on her way towards the door. But all the while her eyes were fixed intently and with settled purpose on the pistol in his hand.

Sombras, however, took no note of this. He stood waiting, with his eyes fixed on Hilary, until they should be left alone. A scheme was forming in his mind to turn the capture of his rival to the best advantage. Absorbed in this, he did not even hear her stop behind him. The next instant she had pounced like lightning on the pistol, wrenched it from his hand, and, retreating half a dozen paces, stood with her finger on the trigger, and the barrel levelled at his head.

"Take care!" she cried, with panting breath and blazing eyes. "If you make a movement, I will fire!"

The swiftness of the act held Sombras thunderstruck, and Hilary scarcely less so. For some moments the two men stood gazing at the girl, as much in admiration as surprise.

Indeed, there was something in her aspect of defiant beauty, in contrast with her former languor and docility, as startling as the transformation of a Grace into a Fury. It held them spellbound.

Hilary was the first to speak.

"Thyrza," he said, imperatively, though at heart he longed to catch her up and kiss her; "Give up the pistol."

"Never!" she cried, not turning her blazing eyes aside from Sombras. "Never!"

"Then give it up to me," he said. "Come, Thyrza!"

"Yes," she answered, "of course, if you would rather have it. But I can use it, Hilary, never fear." When, however, he approached to take it she shrank back sharply, as she realised that his purpose might be different from hers. "No, no!" she cried. "You mean to give it back to him; you shall not have it!"

As she spoke she turned quickly round and hurled the pistol through the open

window. It cleared the ramparts of the balcony; the moonlight flashed upon the barrel as it circled in the air. A moment later a faint noise of iron ringing upon stones told that it had fallen into the courtyard.

The two men turned and met each other's eyes. Thyrza was not where she had just been standing. Instinctively they both looked round in search of her. The room was empty. They had not seen her go. But she was gone.

Sombras looked at Hilary. The latter half expected him to raise a shout and bring the guards to his assistance. But in this he was deceived. The fact was, to have done so would have been to end at once the pleasure of excitement which Sombras had experienced in the capture of his foe, and which it pleased him to prolong. The excitement was better than a wolf-hunt.

"That mad girl has spoilt the game," he said. "We must begin afresh. Do you agree?"

"How?" said Hilary. The pistol being lost, he did not understand the drift of the proposal.

"We will fight this out with daggers," was the answer.

"But you have no dagger," replied Hilary.

"But here is what will serve as well," said his opponent: and going to the spinning-wheel he drew out the spindle, a long, bright, sharply-pointed bar of steel. A more formidable weapon could not be desired. Sombras gave an inarticulate sound of satisfaction as he clutched the end which served by way of handle, and tried the point against his thumb.

"You have a dagger," he said. "Draw it and defend yourself."

"I am ready," returned Hilary; and the light glittered on his dagger as he drew it from its sheath.

"Stay!" said Sombras, abruptly raising his hand, and pausing as if a new train of thought had struck suddenly across his brain.

"You have twice given me a chance for life," he continued, after a short pause, "when I was in your power. I do not choose to be indebted to you; I will owe you nothing. If we fight thus I shall kill you easily, for dagger-practice is my pastime, and I have no rival at it."

"So I have heard," said Hilary, calmly. "And I am going to put it to the test."

"No," said Sombras; "I tell you I will owe you nothing. I will not put it in your power to boast that you gave me a better chance of life than I was willing to give you. I will make our chances equal. We will fight this duel blindfold."

"Blindfold!" returned Hilary, amazed at this unheard-of mode of combat.

"Blindfold," repeated Sombras. "Our chances will be then exactly equal. But expect no more of me. I shall kill you if I can."

"I shall expect no more," said Hilary. "I did not ask so much. I thank you."

"These are the conditions," continued Sombras. "We start with the extreme length of the room between us; we advance as we like, stop as we like, and strike as we like. Is it agreed?"

"Agreed," said Hilary.

"You have shown yourself a man of honour," said Sombras. "I trust your honour for fair play."

"I thank you again," said Hilary. "You may safely do so."

Sombras stepped to the door which opened on the corridor and turned the key in the lock. Hilary retired into the farther corner of the room, where he threw off his minstrel's robe, and then his iron corselet. Then both men took out their handkerchiefs.

"Are you ready?" demanded Sombras, as he bound his eyes.

"One moment," replied Hilary, as he followed his example. "Yes! I am ready."

"Then—start!" said Sombras.

Both men seized their weapons with an

iron grasp, and slightly stooping forward, with head advanced and every nerve alive to sharpest tension, stood motionless as statues, each straining his ears to catch the slightest sound of movement on the part of his opponent. A minute passed—two minutes—and still neither altered his position. To the actors of this extraordinary combat, this silence was more trying to the nerves than any sound; for neither could be certain that the other had not moved unheard, and might not at that moment be close upon him, ready to strike at the first sound of movement on his part. Another minute passed—and yet another. Then Sombras put one foot forward softly—then the other—and then again stood motionless. Almost at the same instant Hilary glided forward, softly but swiftly, four or five paces, and then stopped suddenly again, and listened as before. This time he must have made some sound, however faint, which caught the straining ear of his opponent; for Sombras, as if made aware of his

position, lifted his weapon, and stole forward straight towards the spot where he was standing. As he did so his tunic chanced to brush against a corner of the table. At the touch, he wheeled half-round like lightning and drove his spindle-point two inches deep into the solid wood. In the electric swiftness of the act there was something quite terrific. It bore evidence not only of what would have been his adversary's fate, had the touch come from his person in reality, but it told more graphically than any language the morbid tension of the nerves which dealt the blow.

On finding his mistake, Sombras instantly twitched his weapon out of the table, and stood ready, as before. But the sound of the blow had given Hilary the clue he wanted, and he glided towards the spot from which it came, so that when he stopped the two opponents were within a yard of one another. Neither struck, however, for both fancied that the space between them was greater than was actually the case.

At that moment the door of the inner chamber opened and Thyrza's face looked out. Her features were blanched white, her lips blue and parted, and she stared rigidly at the two combatants as if she saw a ghost.

This, however, only lasted for an instant. At the slight sound of the door opening the two men wheeled round at the same instant, each believing that his opponent was in that direction. Then both began to creep forward, side by side, towards the spot where she was standing.

There was something so overwhelming, so unearthly, in the appearance of their bandaged faces, their dreadful weapons, and their stealthy listening motions, that the girl could hardly keep herself from screaming. By a great effort she choked back the cry. An idea had flashed upon her, which only instant vigilance could carry out.

She glided forward into the room, as noiseless as a phantom, until she stood within four feet of Sombras, when she stopped, and

scratched lightly with her finger on the woodwork of a chair. As she had hoped, the sound reached Sombras, but not Hilary, who was further off. The former turned instantly towards her, and made a step in her direction, where he again stood listening. Hilary, on the other hand, still crept towards the door. Her immediate object was accomplished. The opponents were now moving in opposite directions.

The duel, extraordinary at its outset, had now become more extraordinary still. It now contained three actors; two without sight who sought to foil each other, and a third with vision who designed to foil them both.

Hilary had now reached the inner door. It stood open, and, still cautiously advancing, he passed through it. Nothing could have answered Thyrza's purpose better. She glided to the door and closed it noiselessly. Then, crossing to the other door, which led into the corridor, she turned the key as

gently as she could. The door being unlocked, she pushed it open. Then she turned to Sombras.

The noise made by the key turning had attracted his attention. He came straight towards her, with more impatience than he had yet displayed. Indeed, he advanced so quickly that she was forced to step back through the open door more abruptly than she had intended, and her dress swept rustling against the door-post. At the sound Sombras started suddenly forward and drove his weapon into the soft wood.

For a moment he stood listening. It was evident that he was puzzled—perhaps he caught a sound from Thyrza's dress outside. Then he tore the bandage from his eyes.

"Gone! Gone!" he cried, with fury. "Ha! coward! poltroon! white-livered hound! He has played me false. But he shall not escape me," he continued; "I will have him yet." And he rushed out of the room.

His steps could still be heard echoing

down the corridor when Thyrza glided into the room by the door he had just left. She had forced herself into a dark angle of the wall, and he had rushed past her like a whirlwind. She paused and listened.

"He is gone," she said, "but he will search the castle—he will return. I must keep Hilary hidden. Quick! quick!"

She hurried to the inner door and threw it open. But before she could enter Hilary darted out. His eyes were still bandaged, and he had clearly no idea of what had happened. Brushing past the girl, unconscious of her presence, he stopped again and listened, looking puzzled and confused.

"Hilary!" she said.

He started sharply and turned his face towards the spot where she was standing.

"Thyrza!" he ejaculated, in a tone which marked extreme surprise.

"Yes—yes," she said, approaching him. "Quick! He is gone!" She tore the bandage from his eyes as she was speaking.

"I have lured him away. Now hide yourself—in here." She pointed to the inner room—"there is a closet. Quick!—quick! He thinks you have escaped—that way."

Hilary started, and looked at her with trouble.

"He thinks I have escaped!" he repeated. "He thinks I am a coward—a traitor! Thyrza, what have you done?"

"I have saved your life," she cried, impetuously. "Come—come! Hark! Quick! They are coming!"

"No," said Hilary, "I will not come."

"Ah!" she cried, in desperation; and seizing him by the arm she exerted all her strength to force him towards the door. Suddenly she desisted with a low, quick scream. The voice of Sombras was heard saying in the corridor:

"He must be here. I must have passed him."

Thyrza darted to the door and turned the key.

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CHAPTER VI

THE DEVIL'S WELL

THE tramp of feet came down the corridor, and stopped outside the door. Sombras had a band of warders with him. A hand tried the door—then shook it fiercely. The voice of Sombras was heard saying, half in passion, half in triumph, "He is here. He has locked the door." Whereupon a storm of blows thundered on the panels, over which his voice was heard again, now swelling to a shout, "Fool! Coward! Open the door, or I will burst it in!"

At the word "coward" Hilary started. He made a stride towards the door, as if intending to unlock it. But Thyrza was too quick for him. Before he could lay hand upon the key she snatched it from the lock.

Then, before he was aware of her intention, she darted past him to the window, and hurled it out into the night air, where it went to join the pistol in the courtyard.

Hilary tried hard to look at her reproachfully, but he could not do it—the action seemed to him so like a woman's—it was so useless as to be pathetic. The men outside could burst the lock in half a minute.

Indeed, it soon appeared that they were going to do so. The beating at the door had ceased; there was silence in the corridor—silence, only broken by a curious sound, as if some one were pouring sand into the key-hole. But it was not sand. Some grains of it came through into the room and fell upon the floor, small, black, and glistening. The fact was that, outside the door, a warder, with a scoop of paper in his hand, was filling the lock with gunpowder.

Thyrza looked inquiringly at Hilary; she did not understand the scheme in progress. Anxious not to frighten her, he answered

with a smile; but at the same time he drew her to one side, out of the line of danger when the door should be blown open.

Presently a sound was heard of steel striking against flint—then a pause—a noise of steps retreating—another pause, during which an acute ear might have detected, at intervals, the faint crackle of a burning train. This lasted for perhaps ten seconds. Then, suddenly, the whole room trembled with a fierce report, the keyhole spirted fire and vapour, the woodwork round the lock was blown to splinters—and the door was open.

As Thyrza clung to Hilary in terror, Sombras rushed in through the cloud of vapour. His dark eyes glanced eagerly about the room, and gleamed with triumph as they lighted on the lovers. He turned sharply to the warders who had followed at his heels.

"Seize that man!" he said.

The warders started forward, and in an instant Hilary was a prisoner. Three or

four men clutched him, and the others would have done the same, but that they feared to hurt the girl, who clung to him so tightly that they could not get a grasp of him. Sombras saw this, and came to their assistance.

"Come!" he said to Thyrza, "let him go."

"Never!" she gasped. "No! I will go with him."

"Then it will be the worse for him," he answered, with a calm indifference, which instantly produced the effect that he desired. Thyrza shrank back from her lover, and breaking through the ring of guards around him, sank into a chair and pressed her hands against her eyes.

The two men — captor and captive — looked in silence at each other. Sombras smiled contemptuously.

"Take him to the cells," he said; "he is a spy." He paused, and added, in a tone of cutting scorn, "He is a coward."

Hilary started. For an instant it looked as if he were about to break into an insane struggle with his guards; but with a violent effort he restrained himself from an attempt which could do nothing but increase his captor's triumph. He set his teeth and drove the nails into the palms of his clenched hands. These signs of inward struggle were not lost upon his adversary.

"He is a coward," he repeated, slowly, keeping his eyes fixed upon the prisoner, like those of an inquisitor who enjoys the torments of a victim on the rack. "He is a coward—a poltroon—a traitor. Take him to the cells," he added, with still greater deliberation, "he is going to die to-night."

Thyrza sprang up with a cry which made the room ring. "No! no! My God! My God!"

Hilary, surrounded by the guards, stopped at the door and looked back at her. For an instant their eyes met. But it was only for an instant. He saw her standing there, pale,

shivering, agonised. The next moment the vision was shut out, and he was being hurried down the corridor on his way towards the cells.

The corridor ended in a flight of stone steps descending to a corresponding passage on the ground floor. This lower corridor was paved with stone and led to an arched doorway, through which a breath of the night wind blew coolly. Hilary, conducted by his guards, passed through the archway and found himself in a small inner courtyard of the castle, surrounded by high walls, and having in each angle a round tower. Towards one of these, the left-hand tower across the square, in which appeared a small but ponderous iron-studded door, the warders took their way.

The man who seemed to be the leader of the guards was a burly, red-faced individual, with little, twinkling eyes—one of those persons who find it difficult to look ill-natured, whatever their real character may be. To

this man Hilary addressed a question. The party had halted outside the iron-studded door, while another of the warders was inserting a large key into the lock. None of them observed a figure which had come creeping down the corridor after them, and which now stood looking and listening in the shadow of the archway.

"Where are you taking me?" said Hilary.

"To the cell, captain, to the cell," answered the head warder, readily. "The same in which Giles, Lord of Talford, died of want of sleep."

"What?" said Hilary, not understanding the allusion.

"Yes, captain," said the other, apparently delighted to explain his meaning—he was one of the frequent class of persons to whom silence is a physical discomfort: who must talk or burst—"to the cell where Giles of Talford died of want of sleep. Sir Michael Sombras, our master's grandfather, took him

prisoner and shut him in this cell; and being under vow to shed no blood, he had a horn blown in the prisoner's ear whenever he grew sleepy, so that he never fell asleep—and so he died, captain."

"And so after all he slept, in spite of good Sir Michael;" replied Hilary, with an appearance of composure which he did not altogether feel.

"True, captain," replied the warder. "But it was a barbarous punishment, to my thinking. We live in milder times. You will not die of a blown bugle, captain. You will be shot."

Another of the guards, a younger man, brisk, malapert, and self-confident, who had been listening with interest, struck in at this remark.

"Shot, Gregory!" he repeated. "You are wrong. He is more likely to be hanged."

"Tush!" said Gregory, impatiently. "You are always talking like a fool, Joliffe.

The prisoner is a spy; I say he will be shot.

"Spy or no spy," returned Joliffe, "I will wager an angel that he will be hanged."

"Agreed," replied the other; "an angel that he will be shot."

"And if he is neither, we cry quits," said Joliffe. "There are more ways of killing a dog than hanging him, or shooting him either—and our master is inventive in such things."

The listening figure in the archway shivered.

"Then you believe it certain," said Hilary to the two guards, "that I am going to die."

Gregory smiled gravely; Joliffe laughed outright. No language could have signified more plainly that any other supposition was absurd.

"But, come—come, captain," said Gregory, seeing that the door was open; "this way—this way!"

The party disappeared into the tower. At the same moment Thyrza emerged from the shadow of the archway a few steps into the moonlight.

"Those brutal men," she said, shuddering, "they rack my heart! What shall I do? What shall I do?"

She stood still, trembling, and looking hopelessly across the courtyard at the door into which her lover had disappeared. She did not see a man come forward from the archway to the spot where she was standing. It was Sombras. As she had followed Hilary, so he had followed her. It was not until he was almost close behind her that she heard his footsteps, and turned quickly round and saw him. On the instant the resolve came over her to try one last appeal. She would plead with him quite calmly, without passion. If that failed—but she would try that first.

She stood quietly before him, and when she spoke her voice was calm—too calm; it was not natural.

"I entreat you to spare his life," she said.

Sombras had changed his mood. He was now cheerful, gay, and laughing.

"I should pay your beauty a poor compliment," he answered, "if I pardoned him who would have robbed me of it."

"But you *will* pardon him?" she answered, eagerly. "Yes—yes—I am sure you will. You would not stain your hands with such a crime."

"You know me then so well?" he said, with a sardonic laugh, which struck a chill upon her heart.

She sighed. "I know that no one knows you well," she answered.

"And yet," he said, "if you could read my heart——"

She broke in suddenly: "What should I see there? Mercy? Pity?"

"You would see your image," he replied.

"Ah!" she cried out, shrinking from him with a sort of horror. His compliments at such a time were dreadful to her. He saw

this, and it stung him. His voice altered in a moment.

"You would see your image," he repeated, sternly; "and also his who tried to steal it from me. What would you wish that I should do with him?"

"To spare his life," she answered, her self-restraint dissolving into despair. "Oh, see—I come to you—to you, of whom I have never asked a favour—I come to you to implore you for his life!"

"His life!" repeated Sombras, bitterly. "And you love him? And you do not understand that this love is what condemns him. It is not only because he is my enemy that I hate him—it is because he is my rival. It is for this that he is going to die."

"No! No!" she cried, wildly. "Heaven will not allow it!"

"That we shall see," he answered. "But listen—mark me well—will *you* allow it?"

"I?" she repeated, staring at him in surprise.

"You," he answered. "I will put his life into your hands. On one condition, and that depends upon yourself, he shall go free."

"What is it? Tell me!" she said, breathlessly.

"It is the lightest in the world."

"Yes! yes!"

"That you will marry me."

"Ah!" she gasped, recoiling from him, while the angry blood surged up into her face.

"Do you agree?" he said.

She made a step towards him. Her hands were clenched; her eyes blazed.

"Silence!" she said, with such an intensity of passion that he was overwhelmed, in spite of his audacity. "Tyrant! Monster! Your voice freezes me with horror!—to see you makes me shudder! I hate you! I defy you! Do your worst!"

"Ha!" he said, slowly. "Well, so be it. But remember, it is not I who kill him—his

life is in your hands." Turning his face towards the iron-studded door, he raised his voice and shouted: "Gregory! Joliffe!"

There was a moment's silence, and the guards appeared.

"Take the cover off the Devil's Well," said Sombras.

The strangeness of this order — for to Thyrza it conveyed no meaning — was increased by something in the speaker's tone which made her blood run chill. With a dreadful curiosity she fixed her eyes on the two guards. What were they going to do?

One of them carried a torch, though the moonlight was so brilliant that it was hardly needed. Lowering it before him, so that the flame shone brightly on the ground, he advanced with his companion to the middle of the court. There they stopped, and Thyrza saw below the torch-flame a ponderous iron ring attached to one of the large square stones with which the yard was

paved. This stone could not have measured less than four feet square, and was by far the largest in the court.

The two men seized the ring, and, exerting all their strength, drew the stone out of its place, thereby revealing a black yawning gulf, which previously it had covered like a lid.

Sombras took the torch.

"Retire to the tower door—wait there," he said to the two guards. As soon as they had done so, he turned again to Thyrza, and was apparently about to give her some command, when he received an interruption.

Just at this moment another person issued from the archway—a monk, in gown and cowl. Without looking to the right or left, he crossed the court and, passing without a glance between the guards, who made no attempt to stop him, disappeared into the turret door.

In this silence and composure — in this sense of power, as of a messenger intent on

more than earthly things—there was something of impressiveness which would have affected most observers. It affected Sombras in a way peculiar to himself.

"Good Father Florian!" he said, looking after him, with a wry smile. "He scents a sinner from afar. He is as happy as a Merry Andrew, now that he has a prisoner to confess. But," he added, with a change of tone, "by God's truth, he is in the right to get to work so speedily—his time is brief."

The significance of this remark was meant for Thyrza—he looked sidelong at her as he spoke. Though she did not meet his gaze, she felt it. He stepped up to her, took her by the wrist, and drew her forward to the edge of the black gulf.

"Look down," he said, loosing her, and holding the torch over the abyss. "Look down. What can you see?"

Involuntarily, Thyrza cast her eyes into the blackness of the chasm. As far as the torch-light glistened, she could see green,

lichen-tinted walls of rock, so rugged and irregular that the gorge was evidently a natural fissure in the crag. The opening only had been hewn into a square, to receive the stone which served by way of cover. She could see no bottom, but from somewhere down below there came a draught, of cold rank smell, which made the torch-flame flicker. Her first impression was that the place was a kind of dungeon—a little deeper than the light could reach; but all at once her ear, acutely strained, became alive to a faint sound like that of rock-tormented waters, at a dreadful depth beneath. The sensation was most startling; it was as if the earth had opened under her. She shrank back with a cry.

"This is the Devil's Well," said Sombras, who had watched her keenly. "Its shaft descends to a great stream rushing under the vast rock on which the castle stands—roaring into unknown regions under the dark world. But if the devil made it, men have used it;

sometimes, in times of siege, to draw up water; sometimes, as now, for other purposes. What would be the fate of any man who fell into this gulf?"

Thyrza pressed her hands against her eyes.

"Horror! horror!" she gasped out. "Why do you show me this?"

"Listen!" said Sombras, drawing from his belt the spindle which had served him for a dagger, and leading her again to the edge of the abyss. "Listen!"

As he spoke he hurled the steel spike down into the chasm, not perpendicularly as a plummet falls, but so that it struck ringingly against the rocky walls, its descent thus making audible the depth of the abyss. Down it went—down—down—the sound becoming far and faint as it receded, until the ear refused to follow it. The sound nowhere stopped abruptly—it died into the silence. Here was the horror of it. The spike had found no bottom.

Thyrza shuddered and shrank back anew. Her heart beat wildly.

"What are you going to do?" she said.

"You will see," responded Sombras, turning to the guards. "Bring forth the prisoner. And bid the great bell of the castle toll, for a soul will soon be passing."

"What are you going to do?" repeated Thyrza, trembling.

"I? Nothing. It is true that a prisoner is going to die here. But that is because a woman who has the power to save his life will not speak a word to do it."

At that moment the door of the tower opened, and the prisoner was led out. Father Florian was at his side. Hilary looked round him sharply, and as his eye lighted upon Thyrza he started visibly, with surprise and joy. But the next moment his face clouded with misgivings. What part was she to bear in the design which Sombras had in mind? What new trial was she intended to endure?

Sombras motioned to the guards to halt. Then he approached the prisoner.

"Look!" he said, pointing to the chasm of the Devil's Well. "You stand four paces distant from that gulf. You will take one step towards it when I give the word—unless you would prefer a death less easy?"

"Do your will," replied the prisoner, calmly. "I am in your power."

Sombras turned to Thyrza. From the moment of her lover's entrance she had stood motionless, drinking in every sign and sound with breathless eagerness, but without uttering a word. Even now she did not guess what Sombras had in mind, nor realise the terror of the scene about to follow. But she was soon to be enlightened.

He spoke slowly, giving every word deliberate weight.

"This man's life is in your hands," he said. "Will you marry me and save it?"

For an instant Thyrza made no answer. The fiendish ingenuity of the scheme, thus

suddenly revealed, half stunned her. Instinctively, she looked across at Hilary. He was leaning forward, his lips parted, his whole face sharpened with anxiety to see how she would act. Would she yield? Would she elect to save his life at the expense of what he held far dearer? His look restored her to herself.

"His life is in your hands," repeated Sombras. "Will you marry me and save it?"

"Never!" she cried, with resolution. Her eyes continued to be fixed on Hilary's face, and her heart thrilled to see how vividly it brightened.

"You will not?"

"Never!"

Sombras turned to Hilary with a baleful gleam in his dark eyes. But before he could pronounce a word, another voice struck in. The monk, who had hitherto stood silently by Hilary's side, stepped forward towards Sombras. He was a man of about sixty, meagre, tall, and grey.

"Stay!" he cried, with lifted hand. "I charge you to take heed what you are doing —to pause before you lay this crime upon your soul."

For a moment Sombras stared at him, astounded. Then he demanded, with an obvious effort of restraint:

"Have you prepared this man to die?"

"He is prepared," replied the monk.

"Then you can be gone," said Sombras. "He is a spy—his life is forfeit by the laws of war. The rest concerns me only."

"It concerns me also," said the other, boldly. "In the name of Heaven, I charge you to beware how you go further with this deed! I charge you——"

"Peace, crazy priest!" cried Sombras, hotly. "If you do not fear my anger——"

"I do not fear it," retorted the intrepid father.

"If not for yourself, whose robe protects you, fear it for those whose cause you plead. Begone, before you make their case the harder."

This argument, which was a favourite with the speaker, produced exactly the effect which he expected.

"God forbid that I should injure those whom I would save!" replied the priest, letting fall the hand which he had raised in admonition, and moving towards the archway. There, however, he paused, and lifted the crucifix which hung before his breast. "Be sure that retribution will attend this crime," he cried, with the voice and mien of a denouncing prophet. "In the name of Heaven, I charge you to repent! Repent!" he repeated, in a tone which made the hollow archway echo. And with that, he turned and disappeared into the shadow.

Sombras gave an angry laugh. But the affair in hand was too engrossing to allow another thought upon the subject. He turned to Thyrza.

"This mad priest counsels me repentance. That is what I counsel you. This man's life

is in your hands. Will you marry me and save it?"

"Never!" she repeated.

He turned sharply round to Hilary.

"Advance!" he said.

To refuse would have been madness—worse than madness, for the anger of the thwarted tyrant might have fallen on Thyrza. Hilary made a forward stride, and stopped again—a yard nearer the abyss. At the same moment, the great bell of the castle boomed forth the first note of the funeral knell.

The sound, coming at that instant, made the hardiest of the listeners shiver. Thyrza turned even paler than before; it was only by a violent effort that she repressed a cry. The long-drawn ominous vibrations seemed to strike a chill through all her veins. Sombras looked at her with satisfaction. His scheme was working to his heart's desire.

"You see, I give you time for thought," he said. "Now, will you marry me and save him?"

She stood in agony; she wavered. Hilary saw it, and struck in.

"Thyrza," he said, with passionate entreaty, "be true—be brave. If you yield you will condemn me to worse suffering than a thousand deaths; and for yourself, think of your life to come! I entreat you—I implore you—to be strong!"

She looked at him with glittering eyes.

"I will! I will!" she answered.

"Will you marry me, and save his life?" repeated Sombras, with relentless iteration.

"Never!" she answered, as before.

He eyed her keenly for a moment, frowning. Then he turned to Hilary.

"Advance!" he said.

Hilary made another stride towards the gulf. Even as he did so, there came again the boom of the great bell. The sound, falling upon nerves already strained to breaking, had in it something of unearthly horror, utterly beyond description, as if it had been the very voice of Doom.

"Oh! It is horrible!" said Thyrza, shivering.

"Horrible!" repeated Sombras, catching at the word. "What is horrible? The death-bell?—The black gulf?—The thought of the fierce waters, a thousand feet below? It *is* horrible. Will you condemn this man to such a death—or will you set him free?"

"What shall I do?" she cried, in agony. "My God! What shall I do?"

"Thyrza," said Hilary, simply, "you know what you must do."

She turned suddenly towards him.

"Be content, my love—my Hilary! If you die, I will die also. If this black gulf takes one of us, it shall take us both together."

As she spoke she started forward, and would have placed herself beside him. But Sombras was too quick for her. In an instant he had seized her by the wrist.

"You are mistaken," he said, coldly. "The gulf will take one only. Will you marry me, and save his life?"

The girl strove to speak, but no words came. Sombras raised his arm to give the signal.

"Will you?" he repeated.

"Stay! Stay!" she burst out, almost in a scream. "Give me a moment!—only a moment! Let me think!"

"Nay, dearest," said Hilary, in a voice of passionate appeal. "Think of nothing—or think only of our love, our plighted passion. Think only of the kiss with which we sealed it, and never let the lips which gave it speak its doom!"

"Will you marry me?" said Sombras at her other ear. "Will you save him from the Devil's Well?"

"No—no!" she panted. "No!"

"No?" repeated Sombras. "Well, so be it!" He turned to Hilary with a laugh which sounded like the snarl of a hyena. "Advance!" he said—and as he spoke the death-bell boomed again into the night.

For the third time Hilary made a stride

towards the chasm. He now stood upon the very verge of the abyss—the next step forward must precipitate him into space.

"One stride more," said Sombras, "and he is lost for ever. Your last word has come. Think well before you speak it."

"She has thought," said Hilary, interposing. "She will not fail to speak it. Assassin! She has conquered, and you are foiled. Farewell," he continued, to the trembling girl. "Farewell, my love — my life! The bitterness of death has passed. God bless and keep you always!"

"Oh, Hilary! My love!" she cried, in agony.

"For the last time," repeated Sombras, "will you marry me and save his life?"

She turned upon him suddenly, with clenched hands and blazing eyes.

"Tyrant!" she cried, "I will not answer!"

Sombras raised his arm to give the signal.

"You will not?" he repeated.

"No."

His face grew terrible. He turned to Hilary, his voice hoarse with passion.

"Advance!" he cried.

Hilary fixed a last long look on Thyrza, who stood as if transfixed with horror. Then drawing himself erect, he pressed his hands against his eyes, and was in the act of stepping forward into the abyss, when once more the great bell tolled. The sound seemed to break the spell which rooted Thyrza to the spot. With a cry—a sharp, quick, ringing scream—she seized Sombras by the arm.

"Yes!" she cried out, wildly. "I will marry you! Yes—yes!"

CHAPTER VII

WOMAN'S WIT

THYRZA'S cry, as piercing, as heart-rending, as if wrung from her by torture, stopped Hilary almost in the act of falling. With a startled movement he recoiled, and, fixing his eyes upon her, stood there motionless, a picture of dejection and despair. On the other hand, Sombras broke into a laugh of triumph.

"Take him away," he cried, with exultation.

The guards seized their prisoner, who moved droopingly among them like a man too crushed and broken to be aware of what was passing. The turret door swung open; in another moment it had shut behind him. He was gone, and had not even turned his head. Had he done so, he would have seen

Thyrza, standing behind Sombras, with one hand pressed against her heart, fling out the other towards him with a gesture of passionate devotion.

As the door slammed to, Sombras wheeled round and came to her.

"You know the terms to which you have consented?" he said, slowly and with emphasis. "When you marry me he will go free—and not before. Remember!"

With these words he turned away, and went out through the archway, leaving her alone. Had he seen her face as she looked after him it might have startled him out of his exultation. Horror, scorn, and fury had transfigured it—had made its beauty positively terrible.

"Remember!" she re-echoed under her breath; "yes—and you also, tyrant that you are, remember that you have driven me to desperation! Remember that I am in love, and love can make a woman's wit a match for twenty tyrants! But, hush! Now I

must think. A thought came over me just now as if it were a gleam from Heaven."

As she muttered these reflections to herself, she began to walk restlessly about the court, her brow knitted, and her eyes fixed abstractedly upon the stones. Little by little her face cleared—then suddenly became quite radiant.

"Yes!" she murmured, striking her palms together, "yes—yes! I see it all! I know the holy father will assist me—my good confessor—I would trust him with my life."

Turning in her walk as she said this, she saw the figure of the monk emerging at that moment from the archway. She uttered an exclamation of joy and hastened forward.

"Ah, father," she said, "you come at the right moment. I have sore need of your assistance."

The priest stopped, and looked at her with courteous inquiry.

"As far as my power goes, I am at your service," he replied.

"Thanks, father, from my heart," she answered. "Are you going to the prisoner's cell?"

He made a gesture of assent.

"You know his crime?" she asked.

"I know he is a spy belonging to the troops below the castle, who has been taken prisoner; no more."

"You do not know—you cannot know—who this prisoner is?"

"No," he replied, with an inquiring look.

"He is my lover."

"Your lover!" he exclaimed, astonished beyond measure. "He is your lover?"

"Yes."

"Then what do you require of me?"

"I want you to perform my marriage service."

"Your marriage service!" he repeated, more and more astounded. "When?"

"To-morrow."

"To-morrow? How? Where? I am amazed."

"Here ; in the castle."

"You wish to be married here, to-morrow, to the prisoner in yonder cell."

"I mean to be married here to-morrow—but not to the prisoner in yonder cell."

"To whom, then?"

"To Sir John Sombras."

He looked at her, bewildered—almost in alarm.

"But—but—I thought you said——"

"Listen, good father," she replied. "You are in the dark. I must enlighten you. The scheme I have in mind, though bold and desperate, is not hopeless of success if you will help me. You know, you say, that Hilary—the prisoner yonder—is from the camp below?"

"Yes," replied Father Florian, who was listening intently.

"You know that if his comrades were aware of his condition they would seize on any chance to set him free?"

"No doubt," he answered ; "but, alas,

there is no chance. No one but myself has free admission to the castle. No power could storm it — no force could gain admittance."

"No *force* could gain admittance, true," she answered, "but I am going to tell Sir John that I will marry him to-morrow. I should like—it is a whim, a woman's fancy, which I trust my lord will grant—I should like a choir of singers from the abbey, to chant my marriage service."

Father Florian regarded her with fresh perplexity.

"No doubt," he answered—"no doubt you could obtain permission to admit a choir of holy brothers, if that were all."

"But that is not all," she answered, coming closer up to him and glancing round the court, as if even in that vacant space there might be ears to hear what she was going to say.

"Listen!" she continued, in a voice which hardly rose above a whisper. "You must

go down to Hilary's camp; you must tell his story; you must lead a band of his companions to the abbey; you must robe them in the gowns and cowls of monks, and you must bring them in with you to chant my marriage service."

"And to seize the castle?"

"Yes; to seize the castle."

"Ha! ha!" cried the monk, in huge delight, "it is a noble plan." And for half a minute the two plotters stood there without speaking, each gazing at the other's radiant face. The fact was that Father Florian, whose dauntless spirit would have found its true vocation in a soldier's life, saw here a prospect of adventure after his own mind. To lead a troop of soldiers, to execute a military stratagem, to deliver a fair lady from distress and danger, and all in the exercise of his priestly functions—here was indeed a rare proposal! His eyes shone with satisfaction.

"It is a noble plan!" he said again.

"None but a woman's brain could have devised it."

"And not a woman's brain," said Thyrza, "unless she were in love, as I am. But you will help me, father?"

"With all my heart!" he answered, in a voice which left small doubt of his sincerity. "Sir John was ever the enemy of Holy Church, which he has insulted in my person. Indeed, he would not bear my presence in the castle, but that the abbey has an ancient right of dues, which it is long since he has paid. If the hour of retribution is at hand, it doubtless happens by the will of Heaven. There is no need for a word more. Leave all the rest to me. It is to be to-morrow?"

"To-morrow it must be," she answered, "for the troop must march to-morrow—Hilary said so. Ah!" she continued, with a wistful sigh, "how I wish I could see him, if it were only for a moment, that I might tell him of our plans—that I might be able to consult him!"

"I will tell him," replied Father Florian, "I am now going to his cell. I will bring you news of him and what he thinks of this proposal."

"Do—do, father," she replied. "But, oh that I could see him for myself, if only for an instant!"

"Stay!" he said, suddenly, as if struck by an idea: "what if we work this scheme a little further? If a band of soldiers can enter the castle in the robes of a choir of monks, surely one monk's robe can hide a single prisoner."

"You mean——?" said Thyrza, listening eagerly.

"I mean that in five minutes you shall see him. Remain here. But do not keep him long, for I must lie gagged and bound till he returns, as if he had overpowered me, lest, in case of discovery, I should be suspected and kept prisoner also."

"Thanks—thanks, good father!" she exclaimed, in irrepressible delight. "Go—go!

Do not let us waste a moment." But he had hardly gone five paces when she darted after him and put her mouth close to his ear. "Do not tell him of our scheme," she whispered, eagerly. "Let me tell him. Go!"

He made a gesture of assent and, going to the turret door, struck three times upon it with his hand. It was opened by a warder, who, on seeing Father Florian, at once made way. The priest entered, and the door was shut behind him.

Thyrza, left alone, paced up and down the courtyard in an ecstasy of impatience and delight.

"I shall see him! I shall see him!" she said within herself. "Oh, how my heart is beating! How pale he looked!—but when he hears my scheme, how he will alter. It must succeed; it must—it must!" She repeated the phrase several times with growing emphasis, as if to give herself a confidence which at heart she did not altogether feel. "But when I tell Sir John that he may marry

me to-morrow, what if he suspects some stratagem? If the trace of a suspicion strikes him, all is lost. But, no; I feel that I can act my part. Love will inspire me with the mother-wit to match his cruelty, and to bring his schemes to naught."

With her pale face lifted in the moonlight, her eyes as bright as stars, and her whole frame quivering with uncontrollable excitement, she looked half inspired already. But her expression lasted only for a moment. A step was heard approaching down the corridor. She turned quickly, and saw Sombras entering the court.

"Ah!" she muttered, with a catching of the breath. "Why has he returned? And he is smiling! He is dreadful when he smiles."

Sombras came straight up to her.

"Thyrza," he said, lightly, "we have made a compact, an exchange—I, to give you the life of yonder prisoner—you, to give me your hand. I have come to say that I have been

reflecting, and that I release you from your part of the agreement——"

"Ah!" she broke in, with a cry of joy.

"And I thereby hold myself released from mine."

"What do you mean?" she asked, recoiling.

"I thought that I preferred my love to vengeance—that I preferred your beauty to the prisoner's life. I was mistaken. I prefer the prisoner's life, and I set you free that I may take it."

While he divulged this piece of falsity, Thyrza looked at him with a curious smile —a smile in which, had he possessed the insight of a seer, he would have read the signs of danger. It was a smile which covered, like a mask, a mind in which scorn, horror, and despair had drawn and sharpened every weapon with which women are endowed for the discomfiture of man. The best of women —and no better woman ever lived than Thyrza—however loth by disposition to em-

ploy such weapons, have them ready, and will use them, when need justifies the act. And Thyrza's need was desperate, and she felt that she was justified. Behind her was the prison and the Devil's Well; before her was the tyrant. She intended, even as a sacred duty, as the only method of preventing an atrocious crime, to befool, bamboozle, and hoodwink him—if love and passion could inspire her with the wit to do it. But the part she had to play—the part in which her lover's life depended—was one which called for such a piece of acting as the stage, with its pale mimicry of passion, never yet beheld.

Sombras, however, saw nothing of all this. He continued speaking:—

"A wife cold, peevish, as you would be—a wife for ever dreaming of another—is not to my desire. I will have none of her. But I will have my vengeance."

"Well, have it!" she responded, laughing; "what is it to me?"

And as Sombras stared at her, astonished—

"Listen!" she continued; "I have gone too far—it is time that I explained. Come, let us talk this matter over, quietly, like friends—like the friends we were before this man came in between us and made all this mischief."

"What!" he said, as if he could not trust his ears.

"Before he came you loved me—did you not?" she said.

He made a gesture of assent.

"And I loved you! Oh, I have said it now! You thought I loved this man. Ah! Ah! Absurdity! What is he—what is any man compared with you! Is there a woman in the world who would not envy me so fine a lover? And to think that, having you, a bridegroom fit to wed a queen, I should prefer this wretched wandering soldier yonder?"

"Why did you pretend to love him? Why did you entreat me for his life?" he demanded, with a gaze which seemed to read her very soul.

"Why? Because — but you will be angry——"

"No; speak out."

"I wished to make you jealous! Oh, it was foolish of me—it was wrong. But you know what women are! Things of unreason, of caprice." An almost imperceptible smile revealed that he assented. "And by the measure of your rage against a rival, I could gauge your love for me. But I went too far—forgive me. I have acted wrongly, I confess it; but I have tested your devotion. How can I prove to you that I am penitent?" She went up close to him and spoke into his ear. "What if I consent to marry you to-morrow?"

"To-morrow?" he repeated. "You will marry me to-morrow?"

"To-morrow," she answered, "in the chapel of the castle here. Father Florian can marry us."

"You mean to sacrifice yourself to set him free," he said, suspiciously; "but he will not go free."

"Agreed!" she answered, lightly, "so be it! He will not go free. After we are married you will do your will with him. Why should I care? I consent with all my heart."

"Then I need not wait till we are married," he retorted, with infernal cunning. "I can have my vengeance now!"

A shock ran through her—but only for a moment. The next instant her wits saved her.

"Then you will miss the better part of it," she answered. "Do you forget that this man loves me?"

"Well," he said, "what then?"

"Let him be present at our marriage. Let him see your triumph. Whatever you may inflict upon him afterwards will be nothing to his torture then."

"Ha, ha!" he cried, in ecstasy. "Well said. He shall be there. And afterwards——"

"Do what you will," she said, "so long as you forgive me. And you do forgive me —do you not? Give me your hand!"

His eye fell upon the hand which she extended to him. He seized it in his own, and his brow darkened.

"Ha!" he said, regarding it, "he has given you a ring!"

For the moment Thyrza had forgotten it. The error might be fatal. Yet it was in her power to turn it to advantage. She wavered; but only for an instant. Dear as was Hilary's ring to her, his life was dearer.

"Ah!" she said, in a voice which bore no witness of the pang which thrilled her breast. "Ah—I had forgotten it. Let me see whether it will fit your little finger." She slipped it on his finger as she spoke. "You thought it was a love token. It *is* one now!"

The air, the manner with which this was said, completely vanquished him—it was the crowning proof of her sincerity. But in truth the whole array of proofs seemed irresistibly convincing. The single fact that she consented, not alone to marry him, but to leave the prisoner to his fate, seemed, in itself, con-

clusive; and when to this was added the exquisite fidelity of her acting, joined to the natural readiness of every man to believe himself superior to his rival, the result that followed was no matter for surprise. Sombras, with all his cunning, fell a dupe. In fact, his very cunning helped to blind him; for his belief in his own sagacity made it seem incredible that any one should dream of over-reaching him; while the disdain with which a woman's intellect inspired him decreased the strange appearance of her plot for testing his devotion. It was merely the vagary of a woman's brain—a thing, as she herself expressed it, of unreason and caprice.

He settled the ring upon his finger, and looked at Thyrza with a smile.

"I see I must forgive you," he said. "I accept the ring—or, rather, I will exchange another for it. I have one which I shall like to see you wear. I will fetch it in a moment."

He took a step or two to leave her, and then suddenly returned.

"A kiss, sweetheart!" he demanded.

"Stay!" she said, putting out her hand to stop him. "There was something in my mind, just now—I meant to ask you something. Let me see! Ah, I forget it now—no matter—I shall think of it again. It was of no importance."

"Come, my kiss!" he said, with some impatience.

"Ah!" she said, as if a thought had flashed across her brain. "I remember now. We shall be married in the chapel here, and every one in the castle must come to see my wedding. You know how we silly women love a little show and ceremony."

"Arrange all that to please yourself," he said.

"Thanks!—thanks!" she answered. "And oh, how I should like a choir of singers from the abbey! May I?"

"What folly!" he said, bluntly, but with something of the toleration which mere folly merits. And here again his overweening faith

in his own sagacity betrayed him. This whimsey for a choir of singers, so far from exciting his suspicions, helped to lull them; it seemed to him, as he expressed it, a mere piece of woman's folly, such as no man could account for, but which he felt, vaguely and half-unconsciously, was the product of a brain from which nothing worse than folly need be feared.

"I know it is," she answered. "Still, I should like it. But, of course, if you object——"

"Object—not I!" he said, with new impatience. "Arrange it all with Father Florian. Come; my kiss!"

This was the hardest moment in her task; she felt a shiver of repulsion; but without giving herself time to think, she threw her arms about his neck, and kissed him twice. At the same moment the door of the tower opened, and Hilary, robed in Father Florian's gown, and with the cowl pulled forward so that it concealed his face, stepped unperceived

into the court. He stopped suddenly, and saw the kiss.

Sombras smiled with satisfaction.

"But now to fetch the ring," he said. "Wait here a moment." And he vanished in the archway.

The moment he was gone, the girl rubbed off the kiss with passion, as if it stained her lips, while her eyes gleamed bright with triumph, not unmingled with contempt.

"Fool!" she said, within herself. "All is well. I thank Heaven—I thank Heaven!"

A touch fell upon her shoulder. She turned round, startled, and saw Hilary beside her. The cowl, thrown back, revealed his features, which were drawn and grey.

"Ah!" she cried. In the excitement of her task with Sombras her lover's coming had escaped her mind. At that moment it filled her with dismay.

"Go!" she cried. "He will return. Go back till he is gone!"

"Go?" repeated Hilary. "Why, then,

did you send for me?—to see what I have seen? Thyrza, you have saved my life, but you will break my heart!"

"Do you doubt me?" she said quickly, deeply hurt.

"No, Thyrza," he replied, "I never can; I never will. But I fear—I fear that you will yield to save my life. Nay, you have yielded."

"Forgive me, Hilary. How could I bear to see you killed—to see you fall into that dreadful gulf! But all will yet be well."

"You have consented to marry him," he said, inflexibly. "But you must tell him that he may do his worst—that you will never marry him."

"No, no!" she said, rapidly. "I must tell him that I will—it is the only way. But there is no time to speak of this; every moment here is dangerous. I will explain it all when he is gone. Now, go!"

"The only way!" he said, repeating the words bitterly. "You say that calmly, Thyrza! If you marry him to save my

life, I shall be worse than dead. I shall go mad!"

"Begone! for the love of Heaven!" she exclaimed, starting and listening. But the warning came too late. She had only time to pull the cowl in place again, so as to conceal his face, when Sombras entered by the archway, holding in his hand a ring. She turned and met him with a smile.

"Ah!" she said, "I have just been speaking to the holy father about to-morrow's ceremony." She turned to Hilary and continued, "Retire now, father, we will speak of this again."

"Stay, father," said Sombras, interposing, "I also have a word for you immediately about this marriage, which this lady has so speedily arranged."

Hilary suddenly stood still. "Marriage!" he said within himself. He saw Thyrza making secret signs to him to go; but he did not stir.

Sombras turned to Thyrza.

"Sweetheart," he said, "when just now

you told me that you loved me, at first, I own, I knew not what to think. But when you kissed me——"

"Ha!" exclaimed Hilary, within his cowl.

"Did you speak, good father?—No?" said Sombras, turning for an instant and then continuing his address to Thyrza. "When you told me that you never loved that man, but that you only feigned to do so, as a test of my devotion——"

"Ha!" said Hilary, again.

"When you put upon my hand this ring which he had given you—when you proposed to marry me to-morrow—when you suggested that he should be present, so that we might revel in his torture—when you consented to his death, the poor blind fool——"

"Zounds!" cried Hilary, breaking all restraint and taking a stride forward as he spoke.

"What is that?" demanded Sombras, turning.

"The poor blind fool!" said Hilary fiercely, tearing off the cowl.

CHAPTER VIII

MISUNDERSTOOD

"THE poor blind fool!" repeated Hilary, turning his gaze to Thyrza, who stood spell-bound with despair. Then, as Sombras, recovering a little from his stupor of surprise, moved his hand instinctively to where his dagger ought to have been hanging, he continued, "Never heed your weapon: if you have one, you will not need it. I am unarmed, and your guards are within call. I cannot escape, nor did I mean to try. I only meant to see this lady. Neither the guards nor Father Florian are to blame. You will find the holy father gagged and bound in yonder cell, and as for the guards, they could see nothing but the gown and cowl."

Sombras, for all answer, raised his voice

and shouted, "Gregory!" Obedient to the call, the guard appeared.

"Rascal!" said Sombras, "where is your prisoner?"

Gregory was opening his mouth for a reply, when, all at once, his eyes fell upon the face of Hilary above the frock of Father Florian. He stopped in inexpressible consternation and amazement; the words died upon his lips; and, though his mouth remained still open, not a syllable proceeded from it.

Sombras watched him with a sardonic grin.

"Take back this robe to Father Florian," he said; "you will find him in the cell. And thank Heaven that I am in an easy humour, or you should take his place there. Then return and fetch the prisoner, and see that no one, not even Father Florian, visits him again —you understand?"

Gregory replied with a salute, and, approaching Hilary, received the robe, which the latter flung to him, and departed with it

in his arms, with the aspect of a man moving in a dream. Sombras turned again to Hilary.

"By chance," he said, "your presence chimes in with my purpose. Your attempt shall meet with its own punishment. You have been dreaming that this lady loves you——"

"I *have* been dreaming if she does not!" Hilary answered, to himself as much as to the other. He looked meaningly at Thyrza as he spoke, and his voice, though low, was charged with almost uncontrollable emotion.

"Listen, then," continued Sombras. "You shall hear from her own mouth that she detests you." He turned to Thyrza.

"Tell him the truth," he said, "as you have done to me."

Her situation now was terrible. She had not looked for anything like this. If she should waver, even for an instant, in the playing of her part, her lover's life would pay the penalty. Yet how could she keep it up before his eyes? He would believe — the

thought was agony—he must believe that she was false to him. Even at that moment she knew that he was gazing at her, waiting with intensest eagerness for her reply. Her impulse was to throw herself into his arms and defy the tyrant to do his worst—an impulse so intense that it is possible that she might have yielded to it but for a sudden interruption that afforded her a moment's respite.

The turret door swung open, and Father Florian, accompanied by Gregory, came out into the court.

"Ah, father," said Sombras, turning; "I am sorry for your injury by this fellow here. He shall pay the price of it, however, in good time. No one shall insult a holy father in my castle. But, come; I have a word for you. You must marry me to-morrow, in the chapel here."

He looked at Hilary as he spoke with a malignant smile.

"It is my lady's wish—indeed, it is her own proposal, and by God's light it is a

grand one! She wants to have a choir of singers from the abbey—you will see to that. I will give orders to admit them."

"I shall obey," replied the priest.

"But, stay!" continued Sombras, as if a sudden thought had flashed across his mind. "Why should this be to-morrow? Why not to-night? Zounds, and it shall be so!" he went on, in rapture with his own idea. "It wants yet two hours of midnight. At midnight we will be married!"

The despair with which Thyrza heard these words is indescribable. Once more her scheme seemed crumbling into dust before her eyes. But the next moment came a thought of hope. It wanted yet two hours to midnight. Would that be long enough to carry out her scheme? It was just possible. She looked across at Father Florian. If she could only ask him!

"Does this meet your wishes, sweetheart?" inquired Sombras. The question gave her just the opportunity she needed.

"Can you be ready, holy father?" she

inquired, with a glance which he was quick to understand.

"All shall be ready," he responded. "*All!*"

The emphasis conveyed a meaning to her ear alone ; but for her it was sufficient. She felt assured that if the scheme could be achieved, Father Florian would achieve it, and she drew a long breath of relief.

" Go, then," said Sombras, " and get everything prepared."

The priest replied by an inclination of the head, and, turning, left the court without a word.

" This meets your wishes, then ? " demanded Sombras.

" Yes—yes," she answered, without reflecting in what light her action must appear to Hilary.

Sombras turned towards him instantly.

" You see ! " he said, with triumph.

" I see nothing," responded Hilary, still maintaining an appearance of composure—

"except that you have power to force her into saying what she never feels."

"Have I forced you?" answered Sombras, turning to the girl. "Speak out freely! Do you love this man?"

"Yes, speak out freely, Thyrza!" Hilary repeated, "speak out freely, and bid me disbelieve the witness of my ears, which tell me that you have betrayed me. I know this tyrant's power — I know that you are a woman, and have a woman's fears. Tell me that you have been frightened into this, through fears for me or for yourself—tell me that you love me still and that you hate this monster—and though I cannot understand the words I overheard, and which seemed to blast my senses—confess this, and it shall make no difference to our love. Nothing then will change the future. I shall die; but you—you will live to mourn for me, to dream of me, and to cherish the memory of our sacred passion, which no tyrant on the earth had power to alter."

No culprit pleading for his life could have thrown into his voice more passion of entreaty than was expressed in this appeal. Thyrza kept her eyes fixed steadfastly upon the yawning chasm of the Devil's Well. It was from that which she had saved him, and the sight steeled her nerves to resolution. If she looked up—if she met his eyes—some glance, some gesture, might reveal how every word he uttered seemed to break her heart.

Hilary had paused for her to speak; but seeing that she made no movement he continued:—

"This tyrant has used treachery or violence; is it not so? Sometimes the victim on the rack is forced by agony to utter falsehood. Speak, Thyrza! Is it so with you?"

With her eyes still fixed upon the well, she shook her head.

He drew his breath in sharply, like a man in pain.

"Ha!" he said, "it is true, then! You

have given away your love ! You have agreed —you have arranged this marriage ? "

" I have," she said, in a low voice.

" You have given away my ring ?—you have consented to my death ? "

" I have," she repeated, in the same tone as before.

He turned away without a word to where the guard was waiting for him at the turret door. She thought her trial was over ; but suddenly he turned again, and came swiftly back.

" No," he cried, " even now I cannot—I will not — believe that I have understood aright. Once more, and for the last time, Thyrza, I conjure you to be brave. See ! Come to me—hide your head upon my breast and confess that you love me still ! "

Thyrza raised her eyes, and they met his in mute appeal—but she did not speak ; she dared not. Sombras was looking keenly at them both.

" A fair proposal," he said, striking in

with the diabolical ingenuity which distinguished him. "I stand here—you there. We will see her take her choice between us. Come!"

At this bitter climax to her ordeal Thyrza started. She felt in all her being that now indeed the crisis of the trial had come. She moved her eyes from Hilary to Sombras, on whom she kept them fixed. But though she did not look at Hilary, she was conscious all the time—conscious to acutest pain—that he had stretched his hands towards her, while his voice thrilled in her ears:

"Come! come! My love—my love!"

"Ah!" she uttered, in a cry of agony beyond control. But the same instant, with a movement lightning-swift, which served to mask the meaning of the cry, she started forward to where Sombras stood and fell into his arms.

There was a moment's silence. Then Sombras broke into a laugh of triumph.

"Ha! Ha!" he cried, looking across at

Hilary as he held her closely. "I invite you to my wedding presently—and so does she."

But his words were lost—the jibe was wasted. Hilary had thought for nothing but the sight before him—the sight of Thyrza, faithless to him, lying in his rival's arms. The whole nature of the man, ardent and impassioned even to excess, was wrought up to a pitch which more impassive natures could not even realise. Such a passion is volcanic; it either, as in a reticent or sluggish nature, torments and rends the soul in secret, or in a more impetuous spirit, such as Hilary's, it finds a fiery outbreak in a rush of words.

"She is false!" he said, drawing her portrait from his breast, and speaking in a voice which, though not loud, was terrible to hear. "She is false! Oh, if she knew what she was to me!—she was my life, my soul, my Heaven! But I will drag my passion from my heart like a dagger from a wound, though my life rush after it. She is lying

in his arms!—and I thought her heart was mine. Her heart!—I speak as if she had a heart! Mine she has broken, as I break this, the portrait of her fair, false face!"

He crushed the portrait in his hands and hurled the fragments on the ground. Then rushing to the turret door, he disappeared within it.

During all this time Thyrza had continued in the grasp of Sombras, without speaking or stirring—almost without breathing. He did not feel her tremble—nor did he guess that every fibre in her frame was strained and tense in order to prevent her doing so. But the instant that she heard the turret door swing to, as Gregory entered it behind the prisoner, she drew herself erect and turned her face away.

"So much for him!" said Sombras, carelessly. "And now I must leave you, sweetheart. But it is not for long. We shall meet at midnight. Be with your women in the chapel in good time."

She did not turn her head ; but from her throat there came a catching, inarticulate sound which was neither laugh nor sob, but which resembled either. Sombras heard it, and it seemed to strike him.

"What is this?" he asked her. "Are you weeping?"

"No—I am laughing," she replied, turning suddenly upon him, with a wild burst of laughter. Her eyes were glittering, her cheeks glowing red. In his blindness he laughed also, kissed her hand, and left her.

"Yes," she said, looking after him as he vanished. "Yes, I am laughing, tyrant! For the game is played, and I have won it! And you are outwitted, and my lover is saved!"

CHAPTER IX

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE CHAPEL

THE chapel of the castle was situated at the further end of the stone corridor which led into the courtyard of the Devil's Well. Here opened the main doorway, from which a narrow aisle ran straight up to the space before the altar, which stood beneath a painted window representing a white-winged archangel binding the dragon Satan with a chain. The altar was approached by two low steps. Just outside the altar-rail, to the right hand as one faced the altar, was a small arched door, used by the officiating priest and his assistants. Above this door was a deep gallery, shut in by dim red curtains, and entered from the floor above. This gallery was constructed for the special privacy of the master and his family, while the seats

below, within the body of the chapel, were allotted to the servants and the men-at-arms.

The time was close on midnight—an hour at which, for centuries, the gloom and silence of the chapel had reigned undisturbed. But now ten torches stuck in sockets fixed against the pillars, while two lamps flamed against the wall behind the altar, filled the whole building with a glow of ruddy light. The seats were already occupied by the retainers of the castle. About a score of men, most of whom were armed, and twelve or fifteen women, sat there waiting; the neck of every man and woman being twisted round to bring its owner's eyes to bear upon the entrance, while on every face belonging to the same, curiosity and expectation were to be seen graphically depicted. And in truth this flutter of excitement was no wonder. Strange rumours were abroad. That a soldier who had made his entrance in disguise into the castle had been captured—so much was common knowledge; but in spite of endless whispers and surmises, no one

could conjecture what his capture had to do with the event which they were summoned there to witness—with the strange and striking ceremony, as romantic as the legend of a minstrel's song, of this sudden and mysterious wedding at the dead of night.

A sound of feet was heard approaching—the clang of iron heels upon the paving of the corridor outside. There was a thrill of expectation. Then, at the open door, appeared a party of four guards, leading in their midst the prisoner. Every eye was fixed upon him, as the party tramped and clanged along the aisle, and halted in the open space before the altar, on the side opposite the smaller door. Hilary, on his part, cast a single swift glance around him, which took in every detail of the scene with lightning-like rapidity—the crowd of staring faces in the chiaroscuro of the torches, the waiting altar, the door from which the priest would come to marry Thyrza to his rival, and the dim red curtains of the gallery above. But the glance

showed him also that Thyrza had not yet arrived. His eyes sank upon the floor, and he stood motionless, crushing his chest beneath his folded arms, with the aspect of a prisoner at the block, who is kept waiting by the headsman.

All at once, as he stood there, the curtains of the gallery were thrust aside and a face looked out—the face of Sombras. His features were contorted in an ecstasy of malevolent enjoyment, and his whole head, with grinning lips and mocking eyes, thus suddenly revealed, bore no bad likeness to a wizard's demon, called up to execute some piece of devilry in which his spite delighted.

"Welcome!" he cried to Hilary, with an infernal burst of laughter. "I am charmed to see you. A wedding, to my thinking, is a festival at which the chief guest should be a jilted rival. And here he stands!"

Hilary looked up at him, but answered neither by a word nor motion. Only a convulsive clenching of the hands betrayed what he was feeling.

"Here he stands," repeated Sombras. "Ha, ha! They laugh best who laugh last —as I do now." He broke into a railing laugh; then, suddenly extending his left hand, he pointed with his right forefinger to the ring upon it, at the same time making his hand tremble, so that the jewel sparkled in the torchlight like a star. "Do you know this ring?" he said. "You lately gave it to a lady, and she has given it to me as a love-token. But, plague upon it, man, you need not fret for that. She is going to have it back again. I intend it for her wedding-ring. Ha, ha!"

He broke into his taunting laugh again, but stopped short in the midst of it and listened. A sound of steps was audible in the corridor outside. The next instant Thyrza, dressed in white from head to foot, and attended only by Matilda, appeared at the large doorway.

"Here comes the bride," said Sombras. "My bride—my fair one. Mine!"

Launching the word at Hilary as if it were a poisoned arrow, he withdrew his head and disappeared. A few seconds afterwards the small door opened, and he stepped into the chapel. It was then seen that he was dressed in a rich suit of purple velvet, and wore a jewel-hilted sword. He advanced, and meeting Thyrza in the middle of the aisle, he took her hand and kissed it. She answered with a smile, and they came down the aisle together.

Hilary watched them in a kind of fascination. He had determined, when he came into the chapel, that he would see nothing and hear nothing—at least to all appearance—and would thereby cheat the tyrant of his purpose. But he had over-estimated his own power. In vain he told himself that she had killed his passion—that she had proved unworthy of his love—that he had torn her image from his heart for ever. From the instant of her entrance his eyes took in the slightest of her motions. He saw her smile at Sombras—and the latter, coming with her down the

aisle, glanced sharply at his face, and felt the rapture of revenge.

"Where is the holy father?" he demanded, after a short silence, looking round him as he spoke. "Why is he not here? Has he not yet returned from the abbey, with the choir of singers, which I could well have done without? Gregory, look out and see if he is coming."

Gregory, who was one of Hilary's four guards, replied by a salute, and left the chapel. Sombras turned to Thyrza.

"This whim of yours is keeping us all waiting.

"I am sorry for it," she replied; "it was a whim, I own. My gratitude is all the greater that you granted it so kindly."

Sombras, whose delight in giving pain seized every opportunity as if by instinct, placed his hand upon her arm and drew her forward to the spot where Hilary was standing.

"Look at our chief guest," he said. "He

will be tired of waiting for the spectacle which will give him such delight. But no doubt he will be glad to have this chance of thanking you for having asked him to be present. He is your guest, you know—not mine."

Up to this moment Thyrza had not looked at Hilary. Feverish with the last two hours of expectation and excitement, she had not dared to trust herself. A moment off her guard, and all her scheme might be imperilled; a glance, a gesture, might betray her. And her project was so desperate—the slightest chance might cause its ruin. More than once already it had been within an ace of failing; even yet she felt no certainty of its success. But, trembling though she was between hope and fear, no sooner was she forced to face her lover than her wits rose to the occasion and turned it to advantage.

"If the prisoner is my guest," she said, looking full at Hilary as she spoke, "I must beseech his pardon. Our wedding has been

undertaken under such short notice, that he must have the goodness to excuse deficiencies. He will find that Father Florian has overcome them all, and with so much success as will, I trust, astonish and delight him."

The tone of raillery with which these words were said was meant for Sombras; the look with which they were accompanied was meant for Hilary. Both took effect. Sombras was confirmed in his belief that to make sport of Hilary's misery was as much delight to her as to himself. Hilary, with a start, felt the first spark of hope he had experienced since he had rushed, despairing, to his cell. What was the meaning of that glance? What mystery was this? What was going to happen which would astonish and delight him?

At that moment, the great clock above the keep began to strike the hour of midnight. Scarcely had the last vibrations died away when another sound was heard — this time outside the castle—the far, faint sounds of

huge chains clanking over creaking pulleys. The warder was lowering the drawbridge. Father Florian was returning. At the same instant Gregory entered with a confirmation of the tidings.

"Right — right!" said Sombras; "it is well! Now, sweetheart, make you ready."

He looked towards the little door. Every individual in the chapel did the same; but none with half the interest, the agony of hope and expectation, with which Thyrza waited for the door to open. Had Father Florian returned alone?

She scarcely dared to look; a mist seemed to pass before her eyes; then, almost before she was aware of it, the door was open. Father Florian entered. Behind him came a monk—and then another and another—fifteen holy brothers, gowned and cowled, each bearing in his hand a chant-book, came slowly through the door and took their stand in rows, three deep, against the wall inside it.

"All is ready!" said the voice of Father

Florian, from within the altar-rails. "Advance and take your station."

Sombras and Thyrza came forward side by side, and stood outside the rails before him, Sombras at the same time drawing from his finger Hilary's ring. As they did so the priest, who stood upon the elevation of the step, sent his eyes across them into the body of the chapel.

"Hear me, all people present!" he cried, in a loud voice. "You are here to witness the marriage of your master with this lady. One among you is a prisoner, who has been brought to see the spectacle, in order that he may feed the vengeance of his remorseless enemy, before he goes to die." And as he spoke, he pointed with his hand to the spot where Hilary was standing.

The effect of this extraordinary address was verily prodigious. The spectators stared and gaped; Sombras seemed absolutely petrified with fury and astonishment; and even Thyrza, with all her confidence in the worthy

father, could not guess what was his purpose. For one moment there was silence—but the next the father's voice was heard again :—

"Only yesterday I warned that enemy that the hour of retribution might be nigh. I bade him beware—I charged him to repent; in vain. And now I say to him, and I call on you to witness, that even now, in the moment of his pride and of his triumph, the hour of retribution is at hand!"

"The priest is mad!" said Sombras, with the growl of a wild beast, and at the same time laying his hand upon his sword-hilt. The blade flashed in the torch-light; every eye in the assembly looked to see the priest struck down. In the intense excitement of the moment not one of them observed that three of the cowled monks had left their places, had moved towards the larger door, and now stood before it, as a guard.

As Sombras drew his sword, the priest, stepping a pace backwards, threw up both his hands. At that action, as if at a pre-

concerted signal, the cowls and gowns of the monks fell off, and a band of Hilary's men in glittering armour, with Sergeant Philip at their head, burst upon the eyes of the amazed assembly.

CHAPTER X

THYRZA'S WEDDING

FOR the space of perhaps five seconds there was a dead silence—a hush first broken by a small but sharp metallic sound, as the ring which Sombras unconsciously let fall from his left hand struck jingling on the flag-stones. Almost at the same instant came another sound—a kind of steely whisper, swift as the whistle of a switch —the sound of fifteen sword-blades swishing, with a gleam like lightning, from the sheaths of Hilary's men. Close on this again was heard a shout that made the roof ring: "Philip! my brave fellows!"—and it was seen that Hilary had started a pace forward, while the guards gaped stupefied behind him.

These various incidents had passed so nearly simultaneously that they impressed the

thrilled spectators as a single and intensified effect. The next moment they saw Sombras turn, and lash out fiercely with his sword. Never had Hilary been so close to death—the stroke was aimed directly at his head. Swift, however, as the action was, the sergeant was prepared for it. As Sombras turned, he made a movement forward and caught the descending blade upon his own. The lighter weapon, which had been designed for ornament rather than for use, broke short off at the hilt, which rested in the striker's hand; while the blade, rebounding with amazing force, flew upwards, struck the lofty vaulted ceiling, and fell with a clang into the gallery.

Sombras, thus disarmed, hurled the jewelled hilt into the sergeant's face, at the same time stepping backwards, so that, for an instant, he was out of sword-reach. But only for an instant. Half a dozen troopers started forward, and the next moment he was a prisoner in their hands.

The whole scene had passed so quickly that

the spectators, taken completely by surprise, had scarcely made a sound or motion. It was not till the two swords clashed together that a woman broke into a scream. Then in an instant the contagion spread. All the women present seemed to burst into a shriek in chorus, and rushing from their seats, stood huddled, white and panic-stricken, in a crowd behind a pillar. The men, or such of them as carried arms, laid hands upon their weapons, and, as the troopers rushed upon them, prepared at least to make a show of fighting. For some moments all was din and tumult; and high above it all—above the shrieks of women, the shouts and oaths of men in contest, and the clash and clang of weapons—was heard the thunder of the voice of Sombras, roaring to his men.

But all his rage was unavailing. The troopers, led by Hilary, who had snatched a sword from one of the men left in charge of Sombras, came like a whirlwind on the castle soldiers. The latter, on the other hand, were

taken by surprise; their leader was a prisoner already; and, above all, they had no cause at heart to gain or lose by fighting, except the service of a tyrant, of whom they lived in dread. A few were taken fighting; the rest threw down their weapons. The tumult gradually subsided—in a few minutes all was over. Hilary's troopers, flushed with victory, stood in groups of twos and threes about the chapel, each group keeping guard over a knot of crestfallen captives. Except the warder at the bridge, every soul within the castle was present in the chapel and was taken prisoner on the spot.

At the instant when the monks had become transfigured into soldiers, Father Florian had drawn Thyrza, for security, inside the altar-rails. There she had been standing, watching in an ecstasy of alternate hope and terror, the changing series of events above described. When the sword of Sombras glittered in the air above her lover's head, she had clutched the rail convulsively, but without uttering a

cry; nor had she, during the struggle in the body of the chapel, made either sound or motion. But now, when she saw Hilary, safe and victorious, returning up the aisle, she turned abruptly from the rail, and bursting into tears of joy and thankfulness, sank down upon her knees before the altar.

As Hilary reached the spot where, five minutes earlier, he had stood a prisoner, and close to which Sombras was now standing in the keeping of his guards, he was joined by Sergeant Philip. Up to this moment the two friends had had no chance of speaking to each other. Now Hilary seized the sergeant by the hand.

"Thanks, thanks, old comrade," he said, warmly. Then bursting with the question which was in his mind, he added: "Though how you got here is too much for me to guess."

"This holy father brought us," said the sergeant; and, with a motion of his hand, he indicated Father Florian, who was at that

moment coming towards them from the altar steps.

"What, father!" Hilary inquired, in great surprise; "this noble stratagem was yours?"

"Not mine," replied the other, smiling. "I only gave my help."

"Whose was it, then?"

The father turned and pointed with his hand to Thyrza kneeling at the altar.

"This lady's," he replied.

"Thyrza's!" cried Hilary. "What! the thought was hers? Why, then"—he stopped, as such a light broke upon his mind as seemed to strike him blind—"Why, then, she did not wish this marriage! She meant—yes, yes—I see it now—I see it all. And I—great God—I doubted her!"

These words he muttered to himself in a tone of the bitterest contrition and despair. Raising his eyes to the white figure kneeling at the altar, he looked at it with the intensest longing; but his repentance stung him, and he wavered. Then suddenly he seized his

courage, and, with the air of one who gives himself no space for vacillation, went towards her up the steps.

She heard him coming, and rose at his approach and faced him. The tears—the tears of joy—still glittered in her eyes; but her face was radiant with the light of love.

"Thyrza," he said, humbly, "I have been a faithless fool, and no true lover. Can you forgive me?"

She made a quick step forward, and he caught her.

"Perhaps!" she answered—in his arms.

None of the spectators, whether friends or enemies, ever forgot that transient little picture of Thyrza in her lover's arms. And, transient though in truth it was, they had full time to note it. It was some half a minute before Thyrza, who was the first to wake to recollection of realities, started up from his embrace, and they came down the steps together, hand in hand. Her eyes were shining—her colour had returned. It was

wonderful to see how joy, as if by magic, had rekindled that arresting beauty which agony of mind had for a moment touched and dulled.

"Well, captain," said the sergeant, as he met them. "I said to-night that I should live to see you married, but I confess I did not think my prophecy would come to pass so soon. But, come!—the holy father is all ready."

Hilary started. He had not thought of this. The idea, which the sergeant seemed to take for granted, came to him as with a shock of rapture. It seemed an inspiration. He looked at Father Florian. The latter smiled.

"Why, true!" said Hilary.

"And the bride is waiting," said the sergeant.

Hilary looked at Thyrza; and she raised her face to his.

"Why, true!" she said, demurely, with the tiniest of smiles.

"You see," continued Philip; "the father is ready, the bride is waiting, and only the bridegroom is a laggard."

Hilary drew a long, deep breath.

"It is from joy and wonder," he replied. "Thyrza, do you consent to this? Can you? Will you?"

"If you desire it—yes," she answered, softly.

The sergeant, who was standing near a torch, took out his dagger, breathed upon the blade, gave it a burnish with his sleeve, and looked at the reflection of his features in the lustrous metal, which was as lucent as a mirror. Some weapon, he had forgotten what, had cut or bruised his eye, and he feared his countenance—bedecked, it might be, with a smear of blood—might not be exactly what a bride would choose to look on. The eye, however, on examination, proved only to be blackened. And then he remembered what had dealt the blow—the sword-hilt hurled at him by Sombras. The hilt was richly jewelled; it must not be lost. Where was it lying! He cast his eyes upon the ground. He could not see the hilt—which in the scuffle had been kicked

behind a pillar, where it afterwards was found —but something else which glittered caught his eye. He stooped and picked it up.

"What is it?" inquired Thyrza.

"A ring," he answered; "is it yours?"

He passed it to her as he spoke. It was Hilary's ring, which Sombras had let fall. She took it with a cry of joy, and was about to place it on her finger, when she stopped. A thought had struck her.

"It shall be my wedding-ring," she murmured.

She had scarcely spoken when an unexpected voice struck on their ears—sharp, fierce, and startling. They looked round quickly and saw that Sombras, forcing himself forward in the clutches of his guards, was glaring at them with two fiery eyes, appallingly expanded, like a tiger's.

"False jade!" he hissed, between his teeth.

The whole aspect of the man, which resembled that of one gone mad with fury, was so perfectly terrific, that Thyrza shrank back

trembling from the sight of it. But the effect on Hilary, though widely different, was still more intense. It was as if an iron hand had struck her on the face before him.

"Ha!" he said, turning upon Sombras with eyes which matched the fury of his own, "I had half forgotten you. But I am glad to see you there. That was wisdom which you spoke just now: marriage is a festival at which the chief guest should be a jilted rival. And there he stands!"

"Ha!" said Sombras, glaring at him.

"A jilted rival!" Hilary repeated. "A craven who played upon a woman's fears, and is at last outwitted by a woman! But beware, fool and bully that you are, how you insult my bride. Mine—mine—mine!"

"Heavens and earth!" cried Sombras, struggling with his guards.

"Oh, peace!" said Hilary, "what has she to do with you? You are a prisoner of the State. I take your castle for the King—and I am about to take your bride for myself.

Remember your own saying: 'They laugh best who laugh last—as I do now.'" And with a laugh of such intense and concentrated rage and scorn as the sergeant, though his oldest friend, would have believed impossible from him, and which no injury to himself could have evoked, he turned away and left his enemy, with a demon's face, to grind his teeth at him in vain.

But even as he turned—as he approached his bride—his face changed and softened. Hand in hand they went together to the altar rails, where Father Florian was already waiting for them. There was a dead silence in the chapel—a silence only broken by the utterance of the priest, as he began to speak the words which made them one for ever.

And, like a silent comment on the scene, the full moon, streaming through the painted panes above them, displayed, all bright and glittering, the figure of the white-winged angel binding Satan with a chain.

CHAPTER XI

AT BAY

THE ceremony ended; the strange bridal was accomplished; and the two lovers, now made man and wife, came down the aisle together. Wonder and admiration fixed all eyes on Thyrza; for all had heard the declaration of the priest—that the stratagem had been of her devising. A bride is always the chief figure at a wedding; but it does not happen every day that a girl, by her own courage and resource, takes a castle, saves her lover's life, and marries him in triumph before the eyes of his fierce rival.

Thyrza, in passing through the chapel, made a signal to Matilda, who had joined the other women. She left the group, and followed the two lovers to the door.

There they parted — for the moment. Thyrza, with Matilda, retired to her apartments, while Hilary, turning back into the chapel, addressed himself to the task of disposing of the prisoners.

This was not an easy matter ; but finally, at the suggestion of the sergeant, it was arranged to take them in a body to the castle hall, to supply them with provisions, and to keep them there, under a sufficient guard, until the morning. The women were permitted to go free. And thus it came to pass that in a few minutes the chapel was left almost empty.

Almost empty ; but not quite. Sombras was still standing, surrounded by his guards, on the spot where he had been taken prisoner.

Since the moment of his last fierce outbreak he had stood in silence, his dark eyes shooting furtive glances to the right and left, as if in search of any chance of safety. His brow was knitted, and his brain at work with all the cunning of despair. The wedding-service

passed without appearing to attract his notice, so deeply was he wrapped in his reflections; nor was it until Hilary and the sergeant now approached him that he started from his reverie and faced them.

The sergeant was just speaking.

"Where is the cell?" he asked of Hilary.

The latter smiled a little grimly.

"I will come myself and show you," he replied. "I have cause to know the way."

Accordingly, the party started. Two of the soldiers who had charge of Sombras took down torches from the pillars as they left the chapel, for the corridor outside was gloomy and unlighted. Passing down it, they emerged into the moonlight of the court, where, in the centre, like a square black blot upon the silvery flag-stones, yawned the still-open chasm of the Devil's Well.

As the party crossed the court towards the turret door, the prisoner shot a sidelong glance at the abyss. The men who held him felt him start beneath their hands. He did

not stop or check himself, however, and for the moment they thought no more about the matter.

Just at the moment when the party halted, precisely as the guards of Hilary had halted earlier in the evening, and for the same reason —the opening of the turret door—just at this moment Sombras, with a movement sudden as a tiger's pounce, sprang upon the torch carried by the soldier at his right, wrenched it from his grasp, and thrust the flaming end into his face. While the man staggered back, scorched and half-blinded by the burning pitch, he lashed round him with the torch in a half-circle, so that for an instant he seemed to be the centre of an arc of fire. Then, before any of his adversaries realised what he was about to do, he suddenly sprang backwards towards the Devil's Well, where he stood motionless, still facing them, upon the very verge of the abyss.

"Ha! ha!" he cried, with a scream of frenzied laughter, "I am your prisoner, am

I? You are going to send me to the King? You are going to make a show of me, for the mob to stare at? Are you? Fools! Dogs! —who had not sense enough to keep the lion captive when you had him in the net! I tell you I am free!—and here"—he pointed with a backward gesture to the gulf behind him—"here is the road to freedom. Can you stop me? Try!"

He was standing with his knees a little bent, prepared to spring back if they rushed upon him, while his glittering eyes were watching like a lynx's. The soldiers hesitated; for to rush upon him meant the risk —indeed, it seemed the certainty—of losing him entirely; and for this none of them desired to make himself responsible. They looked for guidance to their captain; and, even as they did so, saw that he had taken the responsibility upon himself. Hilary, indeed, perceived the risk as clearly as themselves, but he saw also that the only chance of foiling the mad purpose lay in swift and

instant action — so swift as to forestall its execution. Thus, just as Sombras finished speaking, he darted forward like an arrow from the string.

The space between them was about five yards, a space covered almost in an instant; yet it is certain that, had Sombras so desired, he could have sprung back still more quickly. If such, however, was his first intention, he changed it on the instant. Instead of taking the leap backward, he made no movement until Hilary's clutch was actually upon the velvet of his tunic's breast. Then, letting fall the torch, his two hands closed with a tremendous force upon the other's outstretched arm, while at the same instant he threw his body back above the terrible abyss.

"Come, fool!" he cried, with foaming lips, "come down with me! My death is my revenge!"

With these words he drove his heels against the stone-work of the margin, and with his body hanging at an angle over the black gulf,

exerted all his strength in a fierce effort to drag down his opponent. Hilary, on the other hand, was taken at a disadvantage. His feet could find no purchase on the surface of the flag-stones; he felt that he was sliding; and in another moment he would assuredly have slipped forward into the abyss, but for a curious freak of chance which came to save him. His opponent's heels, as just observed, were fixed below the margin of the gulf; but the forward portion of his feet, which rose above it, formed an obstacle which stopped Hilary's in the act of sliding. There the two stood, feet to feet, their bodies sloping backward, like the branches of a V—each straining every nerve and muscle in a stupendous contest for the mastery.

This unexpected resistance drove Sombras mad with fury. With a sense that Hilary's men were rushing forward to his rescue, and that in another instant he would lose his prey, he put forth all his strength in a last frantic effort. The violence of the strain was such

that for one blind moment Hilary felt that he was lost; the next, he was drawn backward by a dozen hands. The clutch of his opponent slipped upon his arm; and Sombras, with a scream of baffled fury, fell back into the blackness of the Well.

It so happened that the torch, which he had dropped at the beginning of the struggle, had lodged upon the verge of the abyss, where it remained, the burning end still flaming and spluttering on the flag-stone. As Sombras fell, his right heel came in contact with the handle, of which about a foot's length was projecting over the abyss, and dislodged it. Torch and man fell plumb into the gulf together.

Hilary, recovered from the staggering fall, sprang forward and looked down upon them. The sight which met his gaze was such as never mortal eyes had looked on—strange, weird, and awful beyond all power of words to paint it.

Into the stark blackness of the gulf the torch and man were falling side by side. He saw—or, rather, every detail was so flashed

upon his mind that it was branded there for ever—the torch revolving slowly like a wheel —the man, face upwards, with the scream upon it, falling in a slanting posture, like that of one reclining. He was conscious of the torch-flame making a descending flare of light against one rugged wall of the abyss, and of the crooked shadow of the man which changed its shape upon the other. He perceived the glisten of a ring of gems upon the empty scabbard. The whole of this appalling picture seemed to be contracting—to be diminishing beneath his eyes. In five seconds the torch had dwindled to a candle-flame; in three more it was a star. Then, very suddenly, the star went out, and all was pitchy darkness.

The horror-stricken gazer remained standing, in a kind of fascination, staring down into the chasm, which had now become a tomb. But nothing broke the darkness. Nothing stirred the utter silence, except the far, faint sound, a thousand feet below, which came from the fierce voice of raging waters.

CHAPTER XII

THEREAFTER

VERY little more is left to tell.

By the death of Sombras the castle became the property of the Crown, its master having died a rebel to the State. But as Thyrza was the dead man's only relative, though by very distant ties of blood, she would, under other circumstances, have had a claim to its possession. The point, however, proved of no importance; for when the story came to the King's ears—when he heard the tale of the adventures of that most eventful night—he showed a royal mark of his approval by confirming Thyrza in possession under his own signet. And thus it came to pass that, through the title of his wife, his angel of deliverance, Hilary Dare became the master of the castle.

In a wonderfully short space of time the

grim old donjon became brightened and transfigured. The Lion's Den, as it continued to be called—for names once popular endure long after they have lost their meaning—became a title of affection throughout all the country round. In due course there came a time when children's voices were heard ringing through its ancient corridors. Three rosy, bright-eyed cherubs—Thyrza, Hilary, and Philip—were so baptized by Father Florian in the very chapel where their mother had been so strangely married. The chamber where the duel had been fought was turned into a nursery, which Matilda had in charge, and where their little beds stood side by side; and many a day, with shouts of happy laughter, they used the dungeon-tower for games of hide-and-seek, and played at whip-top on the Devil's Well.

Printed by BALLANTYNE, HANSON & Co.
London & Edinburgh

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